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Reflections on Ranganathan's *Five Laws of Library Science**

Richard A. Leiter**

Professor Leiter reminds readers of the first principles of librarianship as enunciated by S.R. Ranganathan, the great Indian library theorist, and explores their meaning for law libraries in the digital age.

¶1 This article is adapted from a column that I wrote for *Legal Assistant Today* in 1996.¹ The column's audience was legal assistants, some of whom, I discovered over my seven years as a columnist for the publication, had responsibility for managing law firm libraries or library resources in addition to their other duties. So from time to time my column drifted into advice about managing libraries. This particular column came about at a time when I was mentoring some younger librarians and discovered to my surprise that they did not know of Ranganathan's *Five Laws of Library Science*.² When I expressed concern about this to professional colleagues, I was even more surprised to find that many of them hadn't heard of or couldn't remember the great Indian library theorist's five laws either.

¶2 I have returned to the subject for several reasons. First, at the time I wrote the original column, I also wanted to share my thoughts on the five laws with my law library peers in a source they were more likely to read than *Legal Assistant Today*. Such are the vagaries of life that it has taken seven years to finally write directly for my peers. Second, Richard Danner mentioned my earlier column in a provocative article he wrote about the law library profession,³ noting that it deserved wider circulation. At the time, two years after publication of the column, I made a mental note to get busy and follow through with my initial urge to write on the subject for *Law Library Journal*. Again, time slipped away.

¶3 But above all, Ranganathan's five laws deserve repeating, frequently and regularly. It is my wish that those not familiar with Ranganathan will become

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1. Richard A. Leiter, *The Five Laws of Library Science*, LEGAL ASSISTANT TODAY, Nov.-Dec. 1996, at 72.
2. S.R. RANGANATHAN, THE FIVE LAWS OF LIBRARY SCIENCE (Sarada Ranganathan Endowment for Library Sci. 1988) (1931).
3. Richard A. Danner, *Redefining a Profession*, 90 LAW LIBR. J. 315, 336 (1998). Thanks for your interest, Dick. How you happened to run across this column is anyone's guess! By the way, though it already enjoys wide circulation, Danner's article deserves another reading. In my opinion, it is one of the seminal articles of our modern professional literature.

interested in his work, and that those who recognize the name but have not reflected on the five laws lately (or who have forgotten them entirely) will have their interest rekindled and, in the process, have their professional enthusiasm and inspiration rejuvenated as well.

Toward A(nother) Philosophy of Our Profession⁴

¶4 Perhaps I should not be so quick to admit this, but in my opinion these laws are sublime and worthy of our professional devotion. I have the five laws prominently displayed on my desktop as a daily reminder of what I believe to be the essential nature of my work. As we struggle to reconcile seemingly conflicting forces like bricks and mortar, bears and bulls, and quills and CPUs, it is easy to forget why we are really here. These forces can draw our attention away from the great work that we as librarians perform on a daily basis. As we lose this focus, we run the risk of losing our enthusiasm, our creativity, our professional soul. This affliction is particularly common (and often acutely felt) among library directors, but it is one that affects the library specialist, too. Catalogers, for example, run the risk of being so taken for granted that they forget how significant they are to the health of the library organism.

¶5 But this is the curse of our profession. Most libraries function so well that our users come to take us for granted, frequently so much so that we become nearly invisible to them. Our professional orientation is toward service—always—and as we strive for (and often achieve) excellence in service, it is not surprising that we are taken for granted! For what kind of a library would we be if our patrons had to *contract* for every use of the library's collection or for every reference question? Have you never wondered at the fact that free-standing for-profit libraries are practically anathema? Access to libraries is considered a right of such fundamental first principles that it is itself taken for granted.

¶6 By focusing on Ranganathan, I do not mean to deflect attention from Morris Cohen's philosophy of law librarianship. In his excellent article,⁵ Cohen presents his own six laws or principles that are uniquely applicable to law libraries. The attempt is noteworthy and instructive for all law librarians—and trustees, boards, deans, and senior partners for that matter! The importance of this article cannot be understated as an essential source for newer law librarians to read and explore. In fact, any law librarian who wishes to succeed must learn these principles well. But Cohen's principles function more as charges *to* librarians about what they should *do* to be excellent law librarians, and not truly as a philosophy of the profession.

4. In a groundbreaking article that probed the "bigger" picture of law librarianship, Morris Cohen described the five laws as "elegant." Morris Cohen, *Towards a Philosophy of Law Librarianship*, 64 LAW LIBR. J. 1, 4 (1971). He also acknowledged that "some librarians consider them profound, but many others find them trite and vacuous." *Id.* at 1. I clearly fall in the former category.

5. Cohen, *supra* note 4.

Ranganathan's five laws, on the other hand, provide a paradigm of how libraries function, how they grow and serve, how they *live*, and so provide for us a framework through which to examine our professional lives and our libraries.

Why Study a Philosophy of Law Librarianship?

¶7 While it is true that you need not know all of the principles of internal combustion engines to drive a car successfully, it is necessary that the driver be acquainted with some basic principles about operating a car. For example, if you don't understand that your car must have unleaded gasoline, or that your tires must be properly inflated, you may well suffer problems down the road. In the same way, it is necessary to understand a little of the science of libraries to properly manage or make the best use of one.

¶8 Many people see a library simply as a bunch of books on the shelf, most with numbers and letters on their spines. They also understand that there are rules regarding checkout and other procedures. Both the call numbers and the rules usually are seen as manifestations of librarians' near-compulsive capacity for organization. Cynics may believe that librarians themselves are the prime beneficiaries of all the absurd rules. But the truth is that the rules are for the benefit of patrons and follow logically from the laws of library science. Any collection of books that is effective, functional, or useful abides by the laws of library science. Otherwise, you have chaos.

¶9 In about 1928, S.R. Ranganathan, then involved in the development of the great library at the University of Madras, first contemplated and began to articulate the ideas that soon would be enunciated in *The Five Laws of Library Science*. This was a period in library history when the world was grappling with fundamental questions. What is a library? What is library service? Libraries were just developing systems of classification and organization, and no one had yet dealt with a unified philosophy that attempted to define the purposes and functions of a library. The principles enunciated in Ranganathan's *Five Laws* were the first and, to date, the only clear definition of a library's functions and responsibilities.

The Five Laws

¶10 First of all, like any philosophy, it is important to realize that merely stating the five laws—or even understanding the words—will not automatically lead to enlightenment about the function of libraries. Although simply stated, the laws demand contemplation and experience before the richness and import of their meaning will be revealed. They are the first principles of library science only, and, hence, do not immediately yield practical application. However, contemplating them as we go about our business in our libraries will provide us with basic tenets to guide us in performing work that fulfills our mission as keepers of the knowledge of our culture.

¶11 The five laws are:

1. Books are for use.
2. Every reader his or her book.
3. Every book its reader.
4. Save the time of the reader.
5. The library is a growing organism.

¶12 What do these laws mean? Why do they sound so silly? It bears repeating—the laws are meant to be elemental, to capture essential meaning and convey a deep understanding of libraries.

“Books Are for Use”

¶13 Just as Newton’s first law of motion (“A body at rest remains at rest unless acted upon by an outside force”) is a statement of the obvious, the first law of library science also puts forth an obvious and elemental principle. But even so, it is a law that is often violated in the practice and use of libraries. Medieval libraries, as an extreme example, were chained libraries. The books literally were attached to the shelves with brass chains and could only be used in a single location. Obviously, this was done primarily for preservation of the books rather than to facilitate their use. (On the other hand, it might be argued that this method of controlling access helped prevent theft and thereby *facilitated* use!)

¶14 But you don’t have to go all the way back to medieval times to find ways by which librarians can obstruct the use of library materials. Maintaining special collections with limited access; storing materials off-site; restricting access to libraries based on memberships, fees, or even by selecting materials under contracts that limit use to particular classes of patrons (such as when a public library, or a library that is open to the public, eliminates print resources in favor of an electronic version of the material that is only accessible to certain patrons with passwords) are all modern equivalents of chaining books to the shelves. And all bring into question whether the library is adhering to the first law: “Books are for use.”

¶15 This first law gives definition both to the concept of an open stack library and to a library that is appointed with tools and furnishings that make the books it contains useful. This law dictates the development of systems that accommodate the use of library materials. For instance, proper and regular shelving of library materials facilitates the use of books. Logical, topical arrangement of materials also facilitates their use. To sum up what we should take from this first law, care must be taken to provide a facility and an organized collection that invite and promote the *use* of its resources. Simple? Yes. Important? Critical!

“Every Reader His or Her Book”

¶16 This law has many important implications for the library. The fundamental issue it reveals is the tension between the cost of materials and the basic right of all persons to have access to the materials they need. In providing a library for the

use of books, one must always be mindful of the fact that since no one individual can own all the available books, one of the library's primary obligations is to acquire a body of literature or research materials that will benefit each of its readers and researchers. A library must formulate policies that ensure that the collection it is building and maintaining is adequate to fulfill the expectations of its community of users. In other words, the collection must be appropriate to the library's mission. A public law library, for instance, must contain a body of work appropriate to the needs of *all* its patrons, nonlawyers as well as lawyers.

¶17 Similarly, policies must be formulated to ensure that the library has an access policy that is appropriate. Any library that limits access in any way must ensure that this restriction does not prevent adequate access to the collection by the people that the library was created to serve. Access policies also have implications for interlibrary loan, cooperative acquisitions, and consortia to which the library may belong. One must also be concerned with programs that provide for the preservation of materials in alternative formats, such as microfiche, CD-ROM, and other electronic formats. The questions here are: Which formats are appropriate? Which will be most useful to the patrons/readers? What software or hardware materials must be acquired to facilitate their usage? Who may enjoy access? Attendant questions involve access to printing privileges, passwords, network access, etc. In public libraries or public academic libraries that serve the public, such questions are not easy to address.

¶18 But there is an even more practical aspect to this law. Librarians must know their readers well if they are to provide them with the materials they need for their research or that they wish to read. Librarians must know the subject matter and the bibliography of the subject, and must ensure that readers know the material, its uses, and how to use it. A responsibility, therefore, of any librarian is to instruct and guide patrons in the process of research or in searching for materials they need for enjoyment or education.

¶19 Finally, reference service gains its legitimacy and its purpose from this law. The importance of reference service cannot be overstated. For many patrons, particularly in a law library, it is through the reference department that they gain knowledge of the materials necessary for satisfying their particular information need. This is particularly true in a law library where most public patrons, law students, and even younger (and tragically inexperienced) lawyers and law professors conduct research with little or no understanding of what the "law" is in its fundamental bibliographic sense. Many legal researchers—especially novices—are overwhelmed by the volume of books required to contain the law. A major part of the reference function is getting our users familiar with the bibliographic structure, or form, of the law. In other words, in helping patrons to do research, we teach.

¶20 In his description of this second law, which is by far the longest of the five laws in the book, Ranganathan explains that the reference function is critical. He observes that it is the business of librarians "to know the reader, to know the books,

and to actively help in the finding by every person of his or her book.”⁶ Reference librarians are trained to bring readers to their books either through formal research instruction, informally in a one-on-one “reference interview,” or by the production of bibliographies, research guides, exhibits, etc. In a sense, patrons “use” the skill of the reference librarian to find the library materials they need.

“Every Book Its Reader”

¶21 This principle addresses the fundamental issue of access. If a book is obtained by a library but is secretly processed and placed arbitrarily on a shelf, or systematically shelved but its acquisition otherwise kept secret, the book may not be readily discovered until the moment when the reader has reached a crisis in his or her research. At such a moment, a frustrated researcher may seek out a librarian or someone else with knowledge of the needed book’s existence, or may simply stumble upon it. While either scenario may represent a happy ending for the researcher, they are not the preferred model of library service. And in the worst case, the book may remain hidden indefinitely.

¶22 How can the librarian find a reader for every book? There are many ways: distribution of acquisitions lists, new book exhibits, providing research guides and bibliographies to patrons at an information counter, newsletters, etc., are ways that a library can aggressively work to connect its resources with its users. But there are more traditional, practical ways employed by all libraries that are not always recognized for the important function they serve in the science of libraries.

¶23 Using a structured, well-thought-out indexing and classification system is the most common. Standard schemes, such as the Library of Congress classification schedules, ensure uniformity of treatment of various materials on similar topics and thereby help books end up in the hands of the readers who need them. Appropriate arrangement of materials in open stacks also is an important means of achieving this objective of the third law. Misshelving a book can make it all but invisible and, for all practical purposes, lost.

¶24 The challenges presented for this law by the emergence of electronic resources cannot be overstated. For instance, what are law librarians to do with electronic databases? How can we convey to patrons entering the library information about the electronic resources that are available “within” (even if not as readily visible as books sitting on shelves)? And what about the “cyber visitors” who use a library’s Web site for research? How, too, do our answers to these questions affect the contracts that we negotiate and the products to which we choose to subscribe? In the digital age, getting the “book” to its reader presents us with unique and tantalizing challenges.

6. RANGANATHAN, *supra* note 1, ¶ 471, at 246.

“Save the Time of the Reader”

¶25 This is my second favorite law. It presents the biggest challenge to the library administrator. Policies always must be formulated with the needs of the library user in mind. Hours of operation must be set so as to ensure the most appropriate and convenient access to the patrons who rely on the library for their research and reading needs. The collection must be arranged in an inviting, clear, and obvious way so as not to waste the time of patrons as they search for the materials they need.

¶26 Attention also must be given to the variety of formats in which information is provided. When a library subscribes to electronic resources, appropriate access to them must be provided. In the case of databases available to the public, public access terminals and printing resources should be made available. This presupposes, too, making the best use of available IP and networking technology. If materials must be placed in off-site storage, provision must be made for easy retrieval of those materials. If materials are available only in microfiche format, readers and reader-printers should be available (and preferably stationed nearby).

¶27 There are other ways to satisfy this law. Well-planned and executed library handbooks, stack guides, and library tours, or research instruction sessions serve the goal of saving the time of the reader. Adequate staffing of reference, information, and circulation desks, as well as telephone reference, also helps patrons find needed materials quickly. Employing the best available technologies to provide quick access to materials or using an online catalog also saves the time of the reader.

¶28 Saving the time of the reader means providing efficient, thorough access to materials. It means satisfied library users. This is the prime measure of a library's success; frustrated or disappointed users mean that the library has failed in its duty and its responsibility. This law might be restated as: “Serve the patron, and serve him or her well.”

“The Library Is a Growing Organism”

¶29 This is my favorite of Ranganathan's five laws. Nowhere is this law more true than in a law library. A law library takes in materials regularly and frequently, it assimilates what it needs, and it discharges its waste. If the public services function of a library is the soul of a library, and administration is its mind, technical services is the body.

¶30 The technical services function of a library is charged with keeping a collection healthy. It must receive a steady diet of “nutrients and supplements” (information resources) to keep all of the library's parts healthy and reliable. There is perhaps no function in a law library that is more important. Should a subscription be mistakenly canceled or a loose-leaf service misfiled, these titles become “sick” and the whole library suffers because its overall integrity is lost. Therefore, it is necessary that technical services librarians take their responsibility very seriously. (Administrators, too, must take them seriously, giving generous support and

encouragement.) Each subscription must be accounted for, supplementation recorded and checked against prior receipts of similar material, invoices checked, and materials promptly processed and accurately shelved. If the goal of a law library is to provide a collection that can be relied upon for timeliness and accuracy, then, arguably, this is the most important function of a law library. The irony is that it is also the library function that is most easily taken for granted.

¶31 It is a common fallacy among many administrators (professionals and non-librarians alike) who exercise control over library budgets that one way to save money is to merely cancel groups of subscriptions and then restart them after a year or so. The problem with this general approach is that, in a living organism, if food and nutrients are cut off for any length of time, the overall health of the organism will suffer—think of what happens if you stop eating. But libraries do not eat money, they consume information. A law library is a delicately balanced organization of knowledge that builds and grows continually each time a legislature meets, a court convenes, or an academic writes. Cutting a library off from this resource at any arbitrary point surely will make it ill, even if only temporarily or mildly, and, in the worst case, will kill it.

Conclusion

¶32 What should we learn from this whirlwind study of Ranganathan's *Five Laws of Library Science*? It is my hope that the reader has gained two things from this essay. First, a greater (or in some cases new) appreciation for the work of the great Indian librarian. Second, a renewed appreciation and perspective on our work as librarians. As we struggle through the myriad crises that challenge our budgets, our resources, our physical space—indeed, in some cases our very existence—it is easy to forget that at the heart of every library beats a basic tenet derived from Ranganathan's first principles: to unite patrons with information.