

MY PROFESSIONAL VALUES STATEMENT:

A Discussion of User Focus, Information Stewardship, and Working Relationships

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INTRODUCTION

Numerous studies have shown that both LIS students and practitioners generally rate some variation on the concept of service to patrons higher than all other professional values (Dole & Hurych, 2001), which is very encouraging. It seems that anyone who enters such a service-driven profession should be so inclined, but this is not always the case. There is room, though, for discussion of how best to serve one's clientele. In my own professional values statement, I discuss my values within three broad categories (user focus, information stewardship, and working relationships) and then elaborate on the specific aspects of these categories I find particularly important.

USER-CENTERED, SERVICE-BASED, AND VALUE-ADDED

While it may be somewhat cliché for an LIS student to say that he values service above all else, and for him to admit to a certain fascination with Ranganathan's *The Five Laws of Library Science*, I am guilty of both. Many of my most closely-held convictions are based on a strong user focus, and on issues of integration, discoverability, and accessibility.

Books are for use and libraries are for users.

As with any service-oriented profession, it is critical for librarians in particular to remember that libraries exist for the convenience of their users, not of their staffs. Discussing his first law of library science (books are for use) Ranganathan (1931) noted with bemusement the tale of the library authority who, when confronted with the need to react to the dramatic increase in circulation, asked when the biggest daily rush of users came. When told that it occurred between 4:00 and 6:00 in the afternoon, his counterintuitive suggestion was "Close the library at four instead of six. That will end the bother" (p.19). Similar thinking prevailed in the discussions for locating a new library in Madras; officials were surprised that Ranganathan recommended locating it in the center of town near the marketplace. The officials had assumed that a remote location away from town would be more appropriate, as it would preserve the books and keep "all sorts of fellows" (p.8) from visiting.

Over many years in retail management, I often counseled employees to remember that the idea was for us to make our customers' lives easy, not vice versa. Avoiding jargon was

particularly important; the average customer in a copy shop was (understandably) not aware that “one-to-two” was the terminology we used for turning an original printed on one side of the page into a copy printed on both sides, yet customer service associates regularly insisted on using the phrase and nearly always reacted impatiently when customers needed an explanation. At another establishment, clients were required to follow a series of computer login requirements including the name of their school. The program used an uncommon (and incorrect) variation of the name one of the most commonly-attended schools in the region, and clients often had trouble locating it. However, staff members regularly assumed that these clients “should have” known how to input the institution’s name incorrectly, because “that’s how our system was written”. This “do it our way” attitude is sadly somewhat pervasive in the full range of service-oriented institutions, from fast food restaurants to the DMV to the library.

Assumptions that users must bend to our operating systems and practices are dangerous, and must be avoided by any professional for whom service is a core value. Instead of requiring our clients to change their behavior and learn our systems, we should be creating new systems that match their needs.

Promote visibility and discoverability, not just availability.

If information cannot be found and retrieved by those who need it, it is largely worthless, no matter how much of it is “available”, or to whom. A good friend once offered me his definition of a “packrat” vs. a “collector”. The former (he was discussing my mother, as it happens) merely acquires items, with no plan of any sort, and usually stores them randomly in boxes or piles. On the rare occasion that she needs an item, she must search through multiple piles and boxes. The “collector”, on the other hand, has an acquisition plan and an organizational scheme, and he knows exactly what items he possesses and exactly where they are at all times, because each one has a specific value to him and he wants -- and perhaps even needs -- it within ready access.

As information professionals, I believe it is our responsibility not only to provide information, but to provide the tools necessary both to retrieve and to use this information, whether through our own intervention or through the use of appropriate technology. I believe one of our primary goals should be to make as much information as possible as visible,

discoverable, and searchable as possible, whether through technological initiatives as digitization, database interoperability (Dublin Core, etc.), the Open Access Initiative and Library 2.0, or through more “bricks and mortar” activities such as improved signage to promote browsability. This is consistent with Ranganathan’s own concept of Open Access, or “the opportunity to see and examine the book collection with as much freedom as in one’s own private library” (1931, p. 300).

As Case notes, in the days before the internet, “All the information was out there in offices, filling cabinets, minds, and computers” (2002, p. 4) but it could be rather cumbersome to use, as each information transaction was separate. It is reasonable to assume that information which is difficult and time-consuming to acquire often *isn’t* used, hence Ranganathan’s fourth law: save the time of the reader. Ayers of the University of Virginia has commented on the likelihood that information in obsolete, difficult to search formats will be more and more neglected in the coming years (Hafner 2005), and the Council on Library and Information Resources and the Online Computer Library Center have made similar pronouncements about the potential future invisibility of these materials (Arthur, Byrne, Long, Montori, & Nadler, 2004; Erway & Schaffner, 2007).

I believe that making the “invisible” visible again will perhaps be the single biggest challenge (and opportunity) facing librarians for decades to come.

Content, not containers.

If Ranganathan’s third law applies, and every book is to have its reader, it stands to reason that every other information artifact should have its reader (or user) as well, and that its user should be able to locate it with ease, no matter the format. As our user-based focus results in the acquisition of more and more digital and other non-traditional content (video, photos, etc.) it is imperative that we recognize the weaknesses of cataloguing systems that segregate based on “container’ and are not cross-searchable and interoperable (Online Computer Library Center, 2004). As Feather has noted, we must remember that format changes are not instantaneous, and that we will be dealing with multiple formats, specifically analog and digital, side by side “for decades to come” (2004, p.195). Therefore, it will be essential that we provide compatible and integrated access and finding aids for all available materials, in whatever format they may exist, whether through the OPAC or other means. In

providing such integrated search capabilities, we also satisfy Ranganathan's fourth law, by saving the time of the reader.

Use the appropriate technology with guidance and without apology.

Technology is not the enemy, and we should look on it as a colleague or a collaborator rather than as a competitor. Therefore, our continuing education on information sources must include a healthy dose of technology studies, so that we can understand what the most appropriate and current technology actually is. Dillon and Norris (2005) dismiss the notion that there is any real and relevant argument over library vs. information science, noting that it is assumed recent LIS graduates will exhibit a certain level of technological familiarity. Shouldn't this level of familiarity be required of all practitioners and not just new graduates? Furthermore, they add, "Since the history of LIS is replete with claims that our field is not about technology, it is about people, then one wonders why any advance in technology should be such a source of concern to people who actually understand this" (pp.294-295).

Feather (2004) asserts that the role of the librarian will be enhanced as we assume more of a training role, instructing our patrons in the "specifics of information searching and retrieval" (p.192), and others have echoed this viewpoint of librarianship as a "value-added" service in which our expertise enhances the available technology, even for those who may already be largely familiar with it (Abram, 2005; DeRosa, Cantrell, Cellentani, Hawk, Jenkins, & Wilson, 2005). I strongly believe that the "value-added" approach to technology is the only realistic way for libraries and librarians to differentiate ourselves in the future.

Overcome the "digital divide".

Training our users is also important in that it is one way of helping to bridge the "digital divide". Ranganathan's second law states that "books are for all" (1931, p. 74). Presumably, he would have extended this law to cover all library materials, and I agree wholeheartedly. If more and more information is to become available in digital format, what we now call the digital divide will soon become an overall *information* divide (assuming this hasn't already happened). I believe that as information professionals, we should do all that we can to overcome this divide, through education and training initiatives, as noted above, in an effort to introduce users to new sources of information and make certain they know how

to use these sources. Essential to the second law is the concept of “education for every person” (p.75). I believe we have specific responsibilities as both educators and information providers: to provide access, provide training, and promote critical thinking skills in order to produce informed consumers of information.

INFORMATION STEWARDSHIP

As information professionals, we play the roles of both information provider and information custodian. Therefore, issues surrounding preservation, intellectual freedom, and copyright are of critical importance.

Preservation is a means *and* an end.

Preservation should focus not only on some general goal of making information available to future generations, but also on making that information available to the current generation. If materials are preserved, but then stored away in airtight archival containers and never seen again, what benefit is there? Feather states that, with respect to preservation:

It is clearly intended that provision must be made to do all that is necessary in order to ensure that both artefacts (sic) and information content, in an appropriate mixture, are available to future generations. At the same time, this concern for the future cannot be allowed to exclude current usage. The present generation is the heir to those who undertook preservation in the past precisely so that the heritage would be made available. Their work is being nullified if access is prevented. (2004b, pp.7-8)

In other words, preservation is an end in itself, but also must be seen as a means to increased use. The JSTOR project, a non-profit initiative to provide high quality digitization of older academic journals is a good example, despite considerable sentiment that digitization is not an appropriate preservation technique (Hughes, 2004; Balas, 2007). I believe, as do OCLC and others, that digitization can foster preservation and can significantly increase use, and therefore should be an everyday priority and not just a series of special projects (Erway & Schaffner, 2007).

Defend intellectual freedom and diversity of thought.

Rubin defines the preservation of intellectual freedom and the necessity of resisting censorship as a “fundamental value of most library and information work” (2004, p.184) and I agree completely. While there may be considerable controversy over what constitutes “censorship” and what simply falls under “selection”, I concur with Asheim’s (1953) assertion that the distinction is based on intent: the selector is inclined toward a positive viewpoint aimed toward finding reasons to include materials, “a presumption in favor of liberty of thought” (p. 67), while the censor has a negative perspective, seeking reasons to exclude or remove materials.

Librarians and information professionals obviously can’t check our personal values at the door, nor should we be expected to, but we should be able to weigh them against the values of our profession (e.g. the right of our patrons to access information) and to behave accordingly. Client needs must almost always take precedence. In my view, this extends to providing as many diverse viewpoints as possible, and providing guidance without advancing into the realm of editorializing or branding offensive information with the bibliographic equivalent of a “scarlet letter”, as some have suggested (Nelson, 1998), no matter how tempting this may be based on our own personal convictions.

Observe a liberal, but ethical, interpretation of “fair use”.

Fair use is an absolutely essential tool for the provision of information. I very much support the “use it or lose it” approach to fair use, promoted by Vaidhyanathan and others, in its assertion that repeated requests for permission to use information that clearly falls under the fair use provisions of copyright law weakens the entire doctrine of fair use, possibly even to the point where it may some day be considered irrelevant and many no longer be considered a valid defense against copyright infringement. (Vaidhyanathan, 2002; Dames, 2005). I believe that information professionals should be at the forefront of establishing the broadest possible definition of fair use, and that we must both assert our rights as fully as possible within the parameters of the law, and lobby for changes in the law when those rights are threatened with erosion. That said, we must also bear in mind the underlying principle of copyright and other intellectual property protections lest we deprive content providers of a primary incentive for their work.

WORKING RELATIONSHIPS

If the library is a living organism, as Ranganathan's fifth law states, its patrons and users are the cells.

A non-discriminatory and diverse culture must be promoted.

I believe that avoiding discrimination of any sort is a moral imperative, whether dealing with colleagues and co-workers or with clients. I further believe that the promotion of staff diversity (gender, ethnic, cultural, *and* intellectual) is an essential goal. If we are to serve all our communities, we must start by attracting members of those communities to the profession. In addition, we must extend outreach programs to underserved populations, including racial and ethnic minorities, non-speakers of English, and even the homeless, by ascertaining what their needs are, rather than deciding for them based on our own set of assumptions.

Collaboration, cooperation, and communication are not optional.

Connectivity, both human and technological, is essential to the information professional. If, as the mantra goes, information wants to be free, it almost certainly wants to be shared as well, particularly in today's networked world. I believe that we must concentrate on breaking down territorial boundaries between libraries, archives, and other institutions, and move toward a new level of interactivity and communication in order to serve the information needs of all our patrons. This move could include consortia and collaborative collection development, OPAC integration strategies, metadata initiatives, collaborative digitization projects, and even collaborations with commercial partners, such as the Google Books project. The idea is to present the closest approximation possible of an "all-in-one" search and discovery tool, because that is what users today expect (Calhoun, 2006).

Lest we forget, however, information transfer should not be confused with communication (Mackay, as cited in Dole & Hurych, 2001) and any discussion of communication and interactivity must also include a human component of cooperation within and among institutions. As ours is a human-centered profession, albeit one that is significantly

aided by technology, communication among ourselves may ultimately be far more important than communication between our systems and data.

CONCLUSION

I believe my professional values reflect a user-centered focus and respect for technology and preservation. These are issues I feel very strongly about; they are the foundation of my interest in this field as filtered through my first semester of study. Although there may be some changes over time, I hope that they will continue to be priorities for me throughout my career, and that they will lay the groundwork for my continued studies in Library and Information Science.

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