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The Ethics of Participatory Librarianship

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ABSTRACT

This article presents an initial discussion of the ethics of librarianship from the vantage of participatory librarianship. Participatory librarianship is an emergent approach to the profession grounded in conversation theory which states knowledge is created through conversation and libraries, being in the knowledge business, are centrally concerned with conversation. This foundation challenges the notion that any person can be without bias, and that ultimately, all ethics of the profession must be viewed relative to the ultimate goal of service. In this context librarians must be acutely aware of their ethical stances and be active in how those ethical stances impact the community they are situated within.

Introductory Note:

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In 2006 the American Library Association's Office for Information Technology Policy (OITP) commissioned a technology brief to look at the area of social networking. The brief was to provide guidance to OITP and the ALA as social networks became an increasing part of policy debates, such as the Deleting Online Predators Act of 2006, but also in the board meetings of libraries around the country. Librarians and policy makers alike would need greater understanding of terms like Web 2.0, Library 2.0 and sites like Facebook and MySpace. What durable concepts could be gleaned from the raft of participatory tools and services now sweeping the web and catching the media's attention that libraries could use in their services?

In the OITP brief, *Participatory Networks: The Library as Conversation*, the authors found a single framework that held together the growing spate of "2.0" services – that knowledge is created through conversation (Lankes, et. al. forthcoming). Based on conversation theory (Pask, 1978), the thesis holds that in order for people to gain knowledge they must engage in some form of conversation, be it with themselves (metacognition), other individuals, or between two groups. These conversations result in a set of agreements that together constitute an individual's domain knowledge. The rise of participatory networks and social sites such as Face Book, Flickr and the like is a result of people seeking to be active constructors of this knowledge. This results in a pressure for participation. As users encounter systems in their knowledge creation process they expect some ability to help influence that system.

This pressure for participation can be seen in many settings, but a clear example is the Internet itself. The Internet is a truly participatory system. At the infrastructure level the only thing that binds the Internet together are sets of individual networks that agree to use a protocol suite (TCP/IP) and to forward traffic to and from the other individual networks. There is no central Internet authority that enforces a network architecture, or even what traffic must flow over the individual networks (many, including libraries, will not carry certain Internet traffic such as instant messaging, or e-mail from a given source). In a very real way, the Internet is an ongoing conversation among network providers. This ability to actively construct a network has supplanted other, more proprietary models of wide area networks. America Online, CompuServe, Prodigy have either disappeared, or radically changed their network infrastructures to accommodate the more participatory Internet model. This pressure for participation in the Internet can also be seen in the applications used on the net. The rise of open source software exemplifies a desire on the part of skilled Internet users to create their own systems.

This participatory pressure on the Internet has now come directly to Internet information services. A culture accustomed to actively shaping tools, systems, and resources now encounter information providers and expect the same voice. Encountering traditional encyclopedias that structure knowledge among elites and disseminate it to the masses is replaced by Wikipedia, which allows users to not only access information, but to construct it. Users who encounter bookstores expect to be able to rate books not simply to shop for them. Users seeking images, now expect to be able to add their own. This is not

a case of people simply looking for the quickest or easiest information, but looking for systems that can accommodate active knowledge construction.

How does this apply to libraries -- in two ways. The first is obviously as organizations that provide information online and off, libraries must accommodate users' growing expectations for participation. The second however is more fundamental. The brief posits that since libraries are in the knowledge business, they are in the conversation business. Books, videos, web pages, all of these are artifacts that only reflect the knowledge creation process itself. To be sure artifacts are useful, but only when they become part of a larger and ongoing conversation. For the purposes of this article, the ethical dimension of "library as conversation" will be explored.

The technology brief includes a series of challenges and opportunities afforded by participatory librarianship, including the following discussion of ethics:

"As knowledge is developed through conversation, and libraries facilitate this process, libraries have a powerful impact on the knowledge generated. Can librarians interfere with and shape conversations? Absolutely. Should we? We can't help it. Our collections, our reference work, our mere presence will influence conversations. The question is, in what ways? By dedicating a library mission to directly align with the needs of a finite community, we are accepting the biases, norms and priorities of the community. While a library may seek to expand or change the community, it does so from within.

When Internet filtering became a requirement for federal Internet funding, public and school libraries could not simply quit, or ignore the fact, because they are agents of their communities. School libraries had to accept filtering with federal funding because their parent organizations, the schools, accepted filtering. We see, from this example, that libraries may shift from facilitating conversations to becoming active conversants, but they are always doing both. Thus, the question is not whether the library shapes conversations, but which ones, and how actively?

These questions are hardly new to the underlying principles of librarianship. And nothing in the participatory model seeks to change those underlying principles. The participatory model does, however, highlight the fact that those principles shape conversations and have an impact on the community. (Lankes, et al forthcoming)”

There are a few central concepts in this statement that this article explore in greater depth, namely:

- the library as both passive and active shapers of conversations and concepts of bias,
- the ethical obligations of librarians to the community, and
- the inclusion of communities directly into the library process.

It should be noted that much of participatory librarianship is unfolding. Concepts, practices, and theory are currently emerging as a community of ideas are debated and tried. As such, this article should not be seen as a sort of manifesto, but as a starting point for community discussion around the ethics of participatory librarians.

The Library as Shaper of Conversations

It was 1999 and the AskA consortium was meeting at Harvard's Graduate School of Education. The panel of librarians, library instructors, AskA services¹ and government officials were discussing a set of quality standards in virtual reference (Kasowitz et al, 2000). When the standard stating that services should be without bias was brought up, an interesting discussion ensued. Joseph Janes observed that the biases of a given AskA service were in many ways, the strength of the service. Take AskShamu (<http://www.seaworld.org/ask-shamu/index.htm>) for example, a service of SeaWorld that answered questions on marine biology, and was considered an exemplary service. "What kind of answer do you think they will give when asked whether keeping animals in captivity is a good thing or bad" asked Joe. Likewise, one could ask a library about the benefits of fair use.

The point was not that these services were without bias, but whether their biases were obvious, and more importantly for the consideration of a virtual reference consortium,

¹ An AskA service is a virtual reference service, normally not associated with a library, which provides expert answers to user questions. The name comes from the normal title of such services like Ask A Scientist, Ask A Volcanologists and the like.

whether the network of all the services achieved a neutral stance. This may seem like a fine distinction, but it highlights an inherent struggle in the ethics of a profession that is situational, but seeks universal approaches. Take the ALA code of Ethics (American Library Association, 1995). Code I states “We provide the highest level of service to all library users through appropriate and usefully organized resources; equitable service policies; equitable access; and accurate, unbiased, and courteous responses to all requests.” Here the professional librarian should be neutral and unbiased. Yet in code VI librarians “...do not advance private interests at the expense of library users, colleagues, or our employing institutions.” So, as in the case of AskShamu, what happens if the employing institution has a bias?

The author argues that all organizations, and all individuals have inescapable biases. The best one can do, from an ethical perspective, is to disclose those biases as much as possible. At the very least this allows our patrons to be aware of potential distortions in service. Going back to the participatory approach, such a disclosure is an essential part of conversation. Conversation theory, and later theories on discourse and communication talk about a sometimes subtle negotiation process that takes place between parties in a conversation. Issues of status, language, experience all factor into an interaction. These interactions and negotiations ultimately end up in a series of agreements that form the basis of knowledge creation. The library profession is quick to point out such biases in service populations -- the public thinks books are all the library offers, the patrons think the library is stuffy, etc. Sometimes these biases are elicited through research and found

in data, but often, they are actually perceptions/biases the professional holds about the public.

With this more situational approach to ethics, where biases and ethical constraints are negotiated as part of knowledge creation, it also becomes clear that the inevitable biases of librarians will shape conversations of the community. This is far from a bad thing. Librarianship is a principled profession. That is to say that it is a profession that has taken the time and effort to make explicit its principles and ethics. As such it is seen as an honest broker in many conversations and information seeking processes. It has become a respected and credible voice because it is so forthright about its ethics and principles.

However, such a principled approach can degenerate into a sort of paternalism when not guided by adherence to some larger goal. In librarianship, this ultimate goal is service, and it should prevent paternalism. Without this drive to serve and be a part of a community, the library can seek to shape the community based on a narrow and elite view. This can easily be seen in the early American library movement when the promotion of literacy became the promotion of the “right” literacy as defined by the library (most often Christian white men). One can still see such paternalism in reactions to the rise in gaming programs at the library. Stocking public library shelves with science fiction and romance novels is acceptable, but promoting video games somehow does not rise to the bar of propriety. Worse, public libraries that may have story times and knitting groups shy away from game nights because teens should somehow be engaged in more educational programs....like knitting and puppet shows?

The bottom line is that ethical neutrality is a myth. Everyone, and every organization has a stance and a set of biases. The best it can do is to make such biases known. Further, it is only by grounding a fields ethics and principles in the ultimate goal of service, that librarians avoid separation from the community, and promotion of their ethics over that of the communities.

Obligations to the Community

The flip side of paternalism towards a community is surrender to that community. A comment to the Ann Arbor District Library asked for “free prostitutes and pie” (http://www.flickr.com/photo_zoom.gne?id=74201588&size=o). While sure to attract some new patrons, many would question whether it is not only in the service scope of the library, but also the ethics of a library that would trade in human desire and promoting obesity, even in communities where both might be legal. Clearly, even though the library is of the community, it does not have to reflect the full range of ethical positions of that community.

How can the library have it both ways, reflecting the community’s ethics, but also have their own? The answer in participatory librarianship, comes again through conversation theory. As was previously stated, in a conversation among individuals, or community members, such as the library and its patrons, there are two sides and a negotiation occurring. Each actor in the conversation is working towards agreement, that includes

what information, actions and the like are “in bounds.” Libraries and librarians must reflect the ethics of their community, but they must also shape them. In many cases the libraries have negotiated an understanding that intellectual freedom and fair use, for example, are ethical imperatives that enrich a community, even though in other agents of the community they are suppressed. In some cases, however, libraries have failed in these negotiations, such as in CIPA, and must resign themselves to operating the best they can within the boundaries the community has set.

What we see in these often subtle negotiations, is that libraries and librarians sometimes actively promote their ethical frames, sometimes simply make such frames and biases explicit, and sometimes actively suppress them in the service of a higher ethical burden – service.

Take again the issue of filtering Internet access. At first it seems to go against the basic principle of free and unencumbered intellectual access to information. However, let’s take the situation of a public library that turns off filtering of public access computing for adults upon request. Now let’s say that the police, aware of this practice, start patrolling the library and looking over people’s shoulders, in particular watching for parole violations by sexual offenders. One can well imagine that such observation might have a chilling effect on Internet usage. Is it ethical to require filtering of all terminals to remove the police presence, thereby allowing the greatest access to the greatest number of people? In participatory librarianship, the ultimate answer to this question can only be derived by actively engaging the service community in conversation. It may sound like

this approach rules out ethical stands, or that the lowest ethical common denominator shall win, but this ignores the power of a principled profession that in most cases already holds credibility and the good faith of the community. Put plainly, negotiations can be active and spirited, and sometimes, people agree to disagree.

Inclusion of Communities

Another community aspect of participatory librarianship is direct inclusion of the patron into the library's processes. As the technology brief states:

“How can such a traditionally rigid system [the catalog]... be made more participatory? What if the user, finding no relevant information in the catalog, adds either the information or a placeholder for someone else to fill in the missing information? Possibly the user adds information from his or her expertise. However, assuming that most people go to a catalog because they don't have the information, perhaps the user instead begins a process for adding the information. The user might ask a question using a virtual reference service; at the end of the transaction, the user then has the option to add the question, along with the answer and associated materials, to the catalog. Or perhaps, the user simply leaves the query in the catalog for other patrons to answer, requesting to be notified when an answer is posted. In that case, when a new user does a catalog search and runs across the question, he or she can provide an answer. That answer might be a textual entry (or an image, sound, or video), or simply a new query that directs the

original questioner or new patrons to existing information in the catalog (user created “see also entries” in the catalog). (Lankes, et al, forthcoming)”

This idea of community inclusion directly into library processes has also included ideas of offering community organizations shelving space for them to house (and maintain) their own documents. Other ideas discussed as part of ongoing conversations with the Free Library of Philadelphia, include the library publishing works by community authors and musicians, or accessioning video of local events and town meetings.

While such ideas raise questions of quality, expertise and the like (to be answered in an ongoing and active conversation with the community), there are ethical issues raised as well. As previous discussed, libraries are not required to represent the full range of ethical norms in their institutions, just as a community’s churches, court rooms, or classrooms are places with strong ethical boundaries. What is interesting about all of these settings is that at their best they invite open discussion and instruction on ethical conduct.

This idea that a library can be a proactive caldron to instruct ethical behavior is far from a unique concept. Discussions on intellectual freedom, copyright and the role of libraries in digital divide issues are at their hearts as much about ethics as they are about policy, technology, or practice. Even the ALA Code of Ethics prescribe action:

“We strive for excellence in the profession by maintaining and enhancing our own knowledge and skills, by encouraging the professional development of co-workers, and by fostering the aspirations of potential members of the profession.”

“Striving” and “fostering” imply moving beyond a simple unbiased or neutral approach to work. Instead they imply actively biasing conversations. Note code V where librarians should “advocate conditions of employment.” Or look at code III where librarians “protect each library user's right.” This has translated into a pronounced bias and position in terms of things like the Patriot Act. By inviting the community into the library as partners, we also have a chance to invite the community to learn and share (and continuously shape) our ethics. Librarians are free to do so because they understand that it is impossible to enter into any relationship (including a service relationship) without biases. For a much deeper conversation about how library ethics can be proactively transferred see Latham’s historical consideration of libraries role in the labor movement of the 1930’s.

A Biased and Principles Profession

Participatory librarianship is grounded in the theory that knowledge is created through conversation. As an individual or community seeks to learn, it seeks to engage in a process of communications that lead to a series of agreements. Ethics plays a two-part role in this knowledge creation process, both vital. The first is in the belief that librarians must act ethically in these interactions. They must be dedicated to service, dedicated to

providing the best information available to them, and do so in a way that best represents the community that the librarian is situated within. The second role of ethics is in the communication act itself. Librarians must make their ethical stance clear and discoverable. This includes being upfront about potential biases held by the librarians, the library, and the profession as a whole. It is only by being up front and honest about existing ethical stances that the profession can continue to be a trusted member of the community and broker of information.

Librarians are biased towards disclosing more information than less, to providing more viewpoints than fewer, and for doing so in a way that biases personal privacy over institutional supervision. In essence librarians believe in private interactions with very public information. Librarians must understand these are biases founded in ethics, and that the span and scope of their ethical behavior must be constantly negotiated within the community of which they are a part.

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