

Five New Laws of Librarianship

By Michael Gorman

OUR PRINCIPLES FOR PROVIDING AND PROTECTING ACCESS TO KNOWLEDGE NEED A 1990s SPIN, SAYS THE EDITOR OF AACR2

More than 60 years ago, the great Indian librarian S.R. Ranganathan published his Five Laws of Library Science. These brief statements remain as valid—in substance if not in expression—today as when they were promulgated. Ranganathan's Five Laws are:

- > Books are for use.
- > Books are for all; or, Every reader his book.
- > Every book its reader.
- > Save the time of the reader.
- > A library is a growing organism.

Looking beyond the language of 1931, one can see truths in these laws that are as applicable to the practice of librarianship today as they will be to the librarianship of tomorrow. In the process of coauthoring a just-published book and thinking about the issues it addresses, I have had the temerity to formulate Five New Laws of Librarianship—a reinterpretation of Ranganathan's truths in the context of the library of today and its likely futures. I offer these laws in all humility, standing on the shoulders of this giant of our profession.



Libraries Serve Humanity

The dominant ethic of librarianship is service to the individual, community, and society as a whole. By "service" I

MICHAEL GORMAN is dean of library services at California State University/Fresno and coeditor of AACR2. ALA Editions has issued a second printing of his 1995 book, *Future Libraries: Dreams, Madness & Reality*, coauthored by Walt Crawford. This article is adapted from a section of chapter 1.

mean both individual acts of help and the furtherance of the higher aspirations of humankind. Beyond that, service in librarianship implies an attention to quality, a desire to live up to and to surpass the expectations of library users. The question "How will this change make the service that this library gives better?" is an analytical tool of great effectiveness.

The psychological urge to serve is at the root of successful careers in librarianship and its psychic rewards are many. In the words of library educator Lee Finks: "It is, we should admit, a noble urge, this altruism of ours, one that seems both morally and psychologically good" (*AL*, Apr. 1989, p. 352–356). Another aspect of this law is its emphasis on humanity—our mission is both to the individual seeker of truth and to the wider goals and aspirations of the culture.



Respect All Forms by which Knowledge is Communicated

Many myths have arisen from the use of electronic technology—the "death of the book," "the paperless society," and other dreams and nightmares. The truth lies in respecting all forms of communication for the strengths that each brings to the conquest of space and time; in acknowledging that the library of the future will use all kinds of carriers of knowledge and information; and in studying the realities of each means of communication in the light of the history of innovation in communication.

Each new means of communication enhances and supplements the strengths of all previous means. This appears to be an ineluctable process despite the fact that each new means is greeted with predictions that it will eliminate previous forms of communication. There is no reason to cling to print on paper, images on film, or grooves on discs in cases when it can be demonstrated clearly that technology offers a cost-beneficial alternative. What is the point, however, in replacing print on paper, etc., when new technology is less effective, more costly, or has other disadvantages? The best approach to the future of libraries lies in this utilitarianism.



Use Technology Intelligently to Enhance Service

Technology has created a false dichotomy in the minds of many librarians. It is almost as though one has to pick between two sides, each of which is violently opposed to the other. In reality, one does not have to choose between being a Luddite or a soulless technocrat.

The history of progress in librarianship has been a story of the successful integration of new technologies and new means of communication into existing programs and services. Librarians have, if anything, been sometimes overeager in the embrace of the new. The intelligent use of technology involves seeking answers to problems rather than seeking applications of interesting new technology; weighing the cost-effectiveness, cost-benefit, and, above all, impact on service of any proposed innovation; and rethinking the program, service, or workflow that is being automated rather than automating what one has.

Online catalogs are demonstrably superior to card and microform catalogs. Networked indexing and abstracting services are demonstrably superior to their print forerunners. It goes without saying that modern libraries should have electronic circulation and acquisition/serial control systems and should provide access, by one means or another, to the world of digitized data and facts of all kinds (numeric, bibliographic, image-based, and textual).

Looked at objectively, the relative roles of electronic communication and nonelectronic communication (print, sound recordings, film, video, etc.) become clear. Electronic methods are best for "housekeeping" and for giving access to data and small, discrete packets of textual, numeric, and visual information (such as those found in many reference works). Each of the other media has areas in which it is the best. In particular, print on paper is and will be the preeminent medium for the communication of cumulative knowledge by means of sustained reading.



Art by Pamela Hamilton

Protect Free Access to Knowledge

Two of the professional values advanced by Lee Finks are stewardship and democratic values. The former calls upon us to "take responsibility for the library as an institution." People of the future will only know that which we preserve. This is a weighty responsibility and one that should be in the minds of all librarians. Our praiseworthy pursuit of the preservation of intellectual freedom for today's materials should, of course, be continued. It should be noted, however, that allowing the records of the past to disappear is a kind of censorship. Libraries are the collective archive of human achievement and the knowledge of the ages. This important role must be at the forefront of any consideration of technological change.

Libraries are central to freedom—social, political, and intellectual. A truly free society without libraries freely available to all is an oxymoron. A society without uncensored libraries is a society open to tyranny. For this reason, libraries must preserve all records of all societies and communities and make those records available to all. Putting an emphasis on the speedy delivery of ephemeral "information" to the detriment of knowledge would be a betrayal of that trust.



Honor the Past and Create the Future

We live in a historical age. The little that is known about the past is not used to inform the actions of the present. Anyone can see the bad effects on society, politics, and daily life of ignoring George Santayana's famous dictum, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." No one should cling to old things just because they are old, nor should anyone discard old things just because they are old.

The library of tomorrow must be one that retains not only the best of the past but also a sense of the history of libraries and of human communication. Without those, the library will be purely reactive, a thing of the moment, sometimes useful and sometimes not but never central to human society.

With a sense of history and a knowledge of enduring values and the continuity of our mission, the library can never be destroyed. Along with this sense of time future being contained in time past there must be the acceptance of the challenge of innovation. It is neither the easiest of prescriptions nor the most fashionable, but libraries need to combine the past and the future in a rational, clear-headed, un sentimental manner. ❖