

## Teacher or Intermediary: Alternative Professional Models in the Information Age

*Value premises underlying the "information versus instruction" debate in reference librarianship are examined in the context of technological design issues now before librarianship. Using theory developed by sociologists Rue Bucher and Anselm Strauss, it is argued that reference service is a "core task" for librarianship's professionalization movement. The "information versus instruction" debate is shown to address a key design issue for reference as a human service, and that issue is how the service is to be distributed. Following discussion of the conflicting value premises underlying this design issue, certain economic and technological developments that may affect the future of reference service are described. The development of a new model for practice, which transcends both the intermediary and teacher role, is proposed.*

WILL BIBLIOGRAPHIC INSTRUCTION specialists, who have invested considerable amounts of their creative talents and time in what they saw as an up-and-coming career path, be displaced? Is the future of reference to be in online database searching and the realization of the dream in which librarians cease to teach and, instead, provide directly all the information that users need? Facing a new technological environment, "instruction types" seem to be thinking not about how they are to further develop and modify their specialty in the Online Age; they're worrying about "survival."

Rather than consider the future, this paper will look into the past—the past of bibliographic instruction, of reference service, and

of some larger issues about the status of librarianship. The past treated here is not the consideration of specific historical events, but an examination of certain ideas that have shaped the development of librarians and their current ways of thinking about bibliographic instruction and reference service. Though many do not find such "philosophizing" particularly useful in day-to-day problem solving, a historical and sociological perspective can help librarians to better understand their present circumstance. Working toward a deeper understanding of the path to their current dilemmas may in the end allow librarians to see new options for the future that they didn't know existed.

A brief outline of the train of thought this paper will pursue may be helpful. The conceptual foundation underlying the argument presented here is the well-established relationship between instrumental value change and technological advance that has influenced many spheres of modern life, but especially environmental policy.<sup>1</sup> The first objective is to consider the professionalization issue within librarianship and to show how reference work has played a very special role in the occupation's long struggle for higher

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professional status. This paper will argue that reference work has the qualities of what sociology has called a "core task" for the occupation as a whole. The second section will comprise a fresh look at the old "information versus instruction" debate, which has occupied reference theorists for at least twenty years. It will argue that the information versus instruction debate hides deeper issues and values that are related to librarianship's status and the "core task" nature of reference. These issues and values are not often discussed at meetings and in the literature, but deserve attention because of their effect on decision making. Following discussion of how these values may shape the future, this paper will touch briefly on some of the technological and economic factors that will also be important in the years ahead. It will conclude with a call to set aside the "information versus instruction" debate and replace it with a new model for a reference role that better reflects the fundamental values shared by librarians.

Regardless of whether the specific programmatic conclusions presented here are accepted by a sizable number of librarians in the field, it is hoped that this paper will open debate on value issues that have received scant attention in the literature up to now. Like other occupational groups (and especially those concerned with professionalization), librarianship has an unfortunate tendency to assume value consensus among its membership and is reluctant to open value debate because such debate threatens group solidarity.<sup>2</sup> The value issues implicit in any technological advance, however, result in the concrete expression of values that may not be held in common by all group members, and so while solidarity may appear to be maintained on the surface, underlying contradictions may grow. This condition is exacerbated by the still-prevalent argument that technological (and professional) decision making can somehow be "value free."<sup>3</sup> By exploring the value choices that accompany technological decision making in librarianship, librarians may in the long run clarify considerably their grounds for decision making.

With these preliminaries out of the way, attention is called to a social fact of librarianship that, over the years, has had an enor-

mous influence in how librarians act, talk about themselves, and relate to the larger social world around them. That social fact is the tenuousness of their collective claim to professional status. Social status for librarianship has for most of the past hundred years been bound up with the fortunes of women in our society. The demeaning but widespread stereotypes, the low salaries, the organizational arrangements that so frequently make males the administrators and females the underlings, all attest to the status problems with which librarianship continues to struggle. As a "feminized profession" librarianship has encountered a variety of problems related to self-concept, problems that have at their root the same issues now being confronted quite effectively by elements of the contemporary women's movement.<sup>4</sup>

A common response in dealing with problems of self-concept is to diagnose the difficulty as an "image problem," which is what much of librarianship has done. When trapped into thinking of its status condition as the result of "image problem," it retaliates by creating counter-images, like the image of the high-technology "new librarian," the occupation's equivalent of a Virginia Slims commercial.

A key rhetorical device librarianship has used to legitimate itself and raise its status has been to seek in the occupation parallels with other higher-status fields.<sup>5</sup> An important means librarians use to draw those parallels involves reference work and what sociologists Rue Bucher and Anselm Strauss have called "core professional tasks."<sup>6</sup>

"Core professional tasks" are those tasks that are shared by large numbers of a particular occupation's membership and that serve to make the members distinctive as a group to the lay public. For lawyers, the core task is arguing in a courtroom, for doctors it is interacting on an intimate basis with clients—the so-called doctor-patient relationship. Never mind that most lawyers seldom come close to a courtroom, never mind that doctors' interactions with patients may more often be perfunctory or through an EKG chart rather than face-to-face; the symbolic power of the "core task" in the public mind provides a ready identification for the profession as a whole that conveys status, the performance of special and esoteric skills, and a sense of

the critical role that the professional members play.

The performance of reference work is a "core professional task" for librarianship as a whole, and as such, all of librarianship (and particularly its professional leadership) has a stake in defining reference work to suit rhetorical purposes. Though reference is only one of many specialties, it is a unique specialty that resonates in so many ways with that other "core task" of a most high profession, the doctor-patient relationship. This paper attempts to show how librarianship as a whole benefits from the image that that particular specialty can convey.

There are a number of features of reference work that reveal the sense in which this task mirrors tasks of higher-status occupations. First of all, reference is a librarian role that involves a "professional-client" relationship, unlike other task areas such as cataloging, book selection, and administration, where the contact with library users is not often direct. Because there is user contact, reference is the "public face" of the occupation. It is the most visible occupational model, if one discounts the person who checks books out at the circulation desk, who is more often not a librarian, anyway. Reference work is also a specialty area in which the "application of special and esoteric knowledge," that criterion so important to achieving professional status, is patent: the public perception of the all-knowing reference librarian (which coexists with other, less flattering images) is testimony to this special characteristic of reference. Still other qualities of reference work that give weight to its "core task" nature are that the work is not reducible to rules, it is difficult to measure, and its practice relies on intuition, hunches, and bits and pieces of information that only long experience and a retentive mind — not a textbook — can develop. Finally, there is a "private practice" character to reference work that is not shared with other library specialties. The reference librarian, though a member of the library staff like the cataloger or the circulation librarian, performs work on the behalf of specific, identifiable users rather than directly on behalf of the organization as a whole. Such a position enables the reference librarian to bend the rules, take shortcuts, and in other ways demonstrate autonomy in

relation to the bureaucratic red tape with which the public sees the library organization encumbered.

All of these characteristics of reference work combine to provide librarianship as a whole with a set of images that serve to enhance the occupation's status. Librarians know that reference work is not any more important or necessary than cataloging, circulation, administration, or any other area of librarianship. One can't provide good library service without all of the different specialties working together. Yet in all this, it is reference that provides a number of paradigmatic work roles which give considerable ammunition in the occupation's fight for higher social status.

The problem of the status of librarianship and this special role that reference plays in the striving for professional recognition has had a subtle but important influence on an old debate in the reference field. I refer to the "information versus instruction" debate.<sup>7</sup>

For those unacquainted with this debate, the basic positions may be stated very simply. The information side argues that it is the role of the reference librarian to concentrate practice on the delivery of information extracted from the source in which the information is found in as complete and digested a manner as possible — in short, "question-answering." Teaching users how to retrieve information themselves, it is felt, falls short of the ideal professional goal of maximum service delivery.<sup>8</sup> The instruction side argues that an appropriate and desirable reference activity, though not the sole activity, is to help users by teaching them how to find answers for themselves. A key element of the instruction side of the debate is the advocacy of self-reliance.<sup>9</sup>

In their extreme forms, the two sides of the debate define two alternative role models for the reference librarian: the information intermediary on the information side, and the teacher on the instruction side. It is difficult at this point to see whether one role model will win out in acceptance over the other as more relevant to our time. It is possible that the two will come to coexist, resulting in two specializations competing between each other for resources, and the likely decline of general reference service as we have known it. Through describing some of the techno-

logical, organizational, and social factors involved in the "information versus instruction" debate, the present situation will be made a bit clearer, and in the end, a resolution that fashions a new role (which is neither teacher nor intermediary, but which combines some of the features of each) will be proposed.

The growth of online bibliographic searching, in which librarians play out to the fullest the intermediary role, has been an important causal factor in reopening the "information versus instruction" debate. Reference librarians are now having to decide which area—online searching or bibliographic instruction—will better further their individual careers, and reference administrators are being forced to decide how best to allocate scarce resources between these two expensive functions.<sup>10</sup> Making decisions requires some projection into the future, and any projection is based on assumptions and values presently held just as much as on assessments of technological and economic trends. Because the trends in technology are for the most part outside the domain of librarianship, we can have some notion of their nature but little control over their direction. Although assumptions and values too often go unexamined, it is time we look at and articulate them more carefully, for through such examination librarians can not only better predict the future, but also perhaps take part in shaping it.

The intermediary role has always had the edge as a role model among those who have a strong interest in the status aspirations of librarianship. The reason for that advantage is plain: the intermediary role expresses the "core task" nature of librarianship. The intermediary role, if fully implemented, would provide considerably more status value to librarianship than the instruction role, just as the doctor has higher status than the teacher. Advocates of the intermediary role, such as Samuel Rothstein, Bill Katz, and Tom Galvin, seem often preoccupied with image; they speak of the role in glowing terms that have limited correspondence to practice, for in practice, answering questions often seems closer to Band-Aid dispensing than to brain surgery. Bibliographic instruction is frequently attacked on grounds of the poor user evaluation it receives, but these critics totally

ignore the few careful evaluations of question-answering in libraries, evaluations which are so distressing that we all often pretend they never appeared in print.<sup>11</sup>

A significant boost to the intermediary role was provided with the innovation of online searching in the early 1970s, because the technology was sufficiently complex and the economics were such as to make intermediaries attractive to both librarians and end users. It was great for those who were concerned about high status for the field because of the status value provided by the visible and public association with computer technology.<sup>12</sup> Early experiments by some researchers to provide users with direct access met in failure, a very welcome result in the eyes of many librarians who enjoyed the newfound status. User dependency on librarians seemed assured by the new technology.

But what about the consequences of the intermediary role for service? What other values does the choice express? The most basic organizational issue in reference service, like any social service, is how it is to be distributed. Although this has long seemed to be a nonissue in reference—those who receive the service are those who ask for it—it is a genuine and serious issue that is unfortunately hidden under the debate over appropriate modes of reference practice.

As a service that has seen little, if any, design change since its origin in the late nineteenth century, librarians tend not to think of the value choices implicit in that design that they have also inherited.<sup>13</sup> They all accept as a basic postulate that reference service is useful to anyone, at least potentially. Almost every user walking in a library door has one or more questions to which a librarian could provide answers.<sup>14</sup> Yet it is known that many if not most library users do not ask questions of librarians, and are actually only vaguely aware of the range of services a reference librarian may perform. Those few questions that are asked relative to the much larger number which users choose to keep to themselves are thus typically of a lower level than the questions for which answers are sought; and most questions go unasked of a reference librarian.<sup>15</sup> Serious questioners are a small minority of users. This leads to the realization that reference service as it is classically performed in an intermediary role is a service

for the few. The intermediary role model, of necessity, advocates providing information only to those who ask, and promises maximum service to that minority. The maximum service that the intermediary promises can be delivered only if there is a substantial limitation on demand, that is, if most questions don't get asked of a librarian. That limitation on demand is provided quite conveniently by the learned behavior of users to not ask questions.<sup>16</sup>

With online searching as it is presently practiced (the logical extension of the intermediary role), other means of limiting demand have been found, such as charging fees, providing minimal publicity for online, and creating the impression that the service is only appropriate for advanced and sophisticated researchers.

In contrast to the value choice of service to the few, which is implicit in the information-giving mode of service, those who advocate instructing users make the opposite value of distributing reference service in an egalitarian a manner as possible. Helping users to help themselves provides for a wide distribution of service, though of course not all of the service is provided by librarians. Those who have had experience in mounting effective instruction programs know, too, that such programs do not reduce the number of questions reference librarians must answer across the desk; the programs increase the number, and, as well, typically make the questions more interesting. By allowing users to become their own question-answerers, instruction advocates to some degree blur the distinction between librarian and layperson, a blurring that has caused problems for those anxious about the occupation's status. The information side of the debate values self-reliance and devalues the dependence on experts which results in service disequilibrium and general service scarcity.<sup>17</sup>

Technological advances such as online tend to clarify the implications of value choices that were made long ago without full awareness of their ultimate consequences. These advances require librarians to look harder at their values and perhaps seek change in them. The choice between service to the few and service to many implicit in the "intermediary versus teacher" decision provides just one more example of this general

phenomenon. Medicine, of course, provides the best-known example. The notion of the doctor as the all-responsible healer led to the development of high-technology medicine, and now we are realizing the huge economic and social costs of the dependency relationship fostered by that kind of medicine.<sup>18</sup> The economics of information retrieval technology, however, which librarianship has only very limited control over,<sup>19</sup> will result in a lessening necessity for information intermediaries.

With computer costs still dropping and the information producers seeing a need to increase the size of their markets, the development of more user-friendly systems seems highly likely. The information industry has used librarians as effective and cheap retailers up to now, but only through direct appeal to end users can the industry achieve the size market it needs. New systems are being developed for the growing home computer market, and terminals are becoming about as common as the family encyclopedia. New pricing structures may be implemented to ensure that maximum market saturation is achieved. Although current pricing methods for online now favor the utilization of intermediaries, changes may be in the offing. Proposals have been made to charge a flat upfront admission fee to a database plus a "viewing" charge for partial output, which would virtually eliminate the economic advantage that highly skilled intermediaries now have over novice end users.<sup>20</sup> Many other technical innovations in online searching combined with new economic conditions make end-user access more and more likely.<sup>21</sup>

The president of Dialog Information Services, Inc., has recently mounted a new counter-argument to the economic argument for end-user access.<sup>22</sup> Since Dialog's experience has been that providing telephone assistance to naive end users is very expensive, it is argued that end-user access is not viable. What such an argument neglects, of course, is the factor of alternative system design criteria. Systems such as Dialog have made considerable developmental investment in a market of trained librarian searchers; the retooling of these systems to accommodate a new market of nonintermediary users may require more capital than is now available to Dialog. Thus, while the older established

commercial search systems may not move into the end-user market, other newer systems are likely to do so.<sup>23</sup>

In academic libraries the development of online catalogs may also lead to the intermediary role becoming an anachronism. Catalogs *must* be user friendly, or at least have the appearance of friendliness; if they were not, the amount of time required for staff assistance would be staggering. At Northwestern, for example, there is now an online authority catalog reflecting virtually all of the library's monographic holdings processed since 1970, and all of its serial holdings, including the latest issue checked in, can easily be displayed on public terminals. Subject access to the online file is now available in a test mode. With members of the Reference Department and other public service staff members working closely with system developers to design online instructions into the catalog itself, the teaching functions of reference again come to the fore. As the library staff members gain more experience with such systems and machine costs continue to drop, it may be from there but a simple step to acquire tapes from other database producers, load them onto their systems, and let their users search them as they do the library's catalog.<sup>24</sup>

The present competition between those who advocate the intermediary role and those who advocate the teaching role is unfortunate and unnecessary. It divides the ranks of reference librarians at a time when unity of purpose on behalf of user needs has never been more important. Those who favor exclusive practice of an intermediary role lock themselves into the practice of a specialty that is rapidly approaching obsolescence due to continuing economic and technological change. The intermediary role also cannot hope to satisfy the information needs of more than a small minority of library users, and thus cannot meet a critical social need for greater equity in the distribution of knowledge. Attempts to foster a dependency relationship between librarian and user may promise short-term gain for librarianship, but they are, in the long run, counter to the interests of both librarians and users.<sup>25</sup>

Though the critique presented here has focused principally on the intermediary role, it must be said that the teaching role as it has

been implemented is also in need of much critical examination.

Much of what is being taught in bibliographic instruction programs is mind-deadening. Teaching about the problem of information retrieval can be intellectually challenging, as the problem touches on some of the most difficult questions in philosophy, linguistics, psychology, and sociology. The bibliographic instruction curriculum should be broadened to treat more thoroughly and creatively basic principles, including such things as set theory for online searching. At the same time, it should take the teaching of technique out of the classroom and into self-instructional learning packages, hands-on experience, and other less expensive mediated methods. Above all, advocates of the teaching role should not make a cult out of teaching. Librarians provide many helpful and necessary services besides teaching, and the totality of that contribution deserves recognition in its own right. Attempts to emulate academic faculty roles can be just as dysfunctional as attempts to mold reference into a doctor-patient model. The teaching cult also tends to divide instruction librarians from all other librarians, which is harmful to all librarianship. For all of these reasons, librarians must work toward defining a new role for reference service.

Forging a new role model for reference librarianship requires first the disabusing of the idea that reference must be a "core task" of a status-seeking profession. The intermediary role is the embodiment of the "core task" idea, and as such serves the status interests of librarianship at the expense of the information needs of library users. If librarians truly wish to work toward the best interests of their users, it is absurd to continue to advocate the old classic professionalism, which places users in a dependency relationship with librarians. Such a relationship does a disservice to users and ultimately retards the development of library services, of librarians, and of much library technology.

The intermediary role still has a powerful appeal to many in librarianship, especially to many library school faculty members, because of the professionalization interests that the role serves. Librarians cannot work to discard it without offering an alternative that is also powerful and intellectually

sound. Pauline Wilson is essentially correct in her critique of the teaching role as being inadequate, and even harmful in some respects, for our field,<sup>26</sup> so further search for a new role is in order.

Though no alternative model adequate to librarianship has yet been fully developed, there are movements afoot in other human service fields that bear close watching for the examples they may provide. These movements all have in common a characteristic that lies at the heart of the ideals of librarianship: they value the sharing of information. The movements are also radically humanistic and show a healthy skepticism toward technological fixes, though they are not anti-technology. The holistic health movement is perhaps the best known of these, but other occupational areas besides physical health are involved in forging a new role model, among them psychotherapy, social work, media and computer activism, and economics. Some useful texts that may help librarianship explore new models for reference service include the book *Helping Ourselves:*

*Families and the Human Network* by Mary Howell, Theodore Schultz' new book *Investing in People: The Economics of Population Quality*, a very interesting article by Paul Hawken in the spring 1981 *CoEvolution Quarterly* called "Disintermediation," the work of Ivan Illich, and that of Gregory Bateson.<sup>27-31</sup> Their message calls upon experts of all kinds to rethink their relationships to nonexperts, and to work toward the sharing of knowledge rather than its opposite, the monopolization of knowledge implicit in the classic professional model.

Undertaking the project of redefining appropriate helping roles for librarians will require the work of many individual librarians, experimentation and research in libraries, and much communication with users. Such redefinition cannot be merely a paper exercise practiced by authors in library journals.<sup>32</sup> But the undertaking appears valuable and librarians, in the end, might not only provide better service for our users but also be the happier for it.

#### REFERENCES 5304

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3. For some discussion of this point, see Manfred Stanley, *The Technological Conscience: Survival and Dignity in an Age of Expertise* (New York: Free Pr., 1978), p.23-24. Also very useful is Hazel Henderson, "Systems, Economics, and 'Female'," *CoEvolution Quarterly* 7:61-63 (Fall 1975).
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5. Acknowledgment is made here to Donald W. Ball, "An Abortion Clinic Ethnography," *Social Problems* 14:293-301 (Winter 1967), from which the author has borrowed a way of looking and the idea of a "rhetoric."
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  13. Writing on the history of reference service has suffered from an ahistorical approach that is biased toward a high degree of professionalization. Frances L. Hopkins, "A Century of Bibliographic Instruction: The Historical Claim to Professional and Academic Legitimacy," *College & Research Libraries* 43:192-98 (May 1982), has fortunately broken new ground to provide a more objective viewpoint. See also Burton Bledstein, *The Culture of Professionalism: The Middle Class and the Development of Higher Education in America* (New York: Norton, 1976).
  14. Patrick Wilson, *Public Knowledge, Private Ignorance: Toward a Library and Information Policy* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1977), has persuasively argued the error in that postulate. His prescription for remedy merits discussion in the field; it may be that through such discussion, values different from Wilson's alone will be seen to bear on the issues presented.
  15. Mary Jane Swope and Jeffrey Katzer, "The Silent Majority: Why They Don't Ask Questions," *RQ* 12: 161-66 (Winter 1972), provides some empirical verification that a small percentage of user questions are posed to reference librarians.
  16. Gregory Bateson, "The Logical Categories of Learning and Communication," in his *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (New York: Ballantine, 1972), p.279-308, explains the sense in which such behavior is learned. Erving Goffman, *Behavior in Public Places: Notes on the Social Organization of Gatherings* (New York: Free Pr., 1963), p.106, proposes an alternative explanation, that of an "implicit contract" between questioner and answerer. Both theories have merit.
  17. John McKnight, "The Professional Service Business," *Social Policy* 8:110-16 (Nov.-Dec. 1977), provides a good summary of the general argument.
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30. Ivan Illich, *Toward a History of Needs* (New York: Pantheon, 1978).
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32. For insight into the is point, see Paolo Freire, "Extension or Communication," in his *Education for Critical Consciousness* (New York: Seabury, 1973). This is not to say that critical writing is not helpful. For a useful discussion paper, see Ray Lester, "Why Educate the Library User?" *Aslib Proceedings* 31:366-80 (Aug. 1979). Lester, unfortunately, makes a curious separation between culture and work.

#### Statement of Ownership and Management

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