

On Service

No matter the profession, “the essence of profession is service to society” (Preer, 2008, p. 3)—for the library profession, service has always been central, but the understanding of how best to serve society has evolved. Furthermore, while service is the most important ethical precept governing librarians, it is not the only precept, and other precepts inherently conflict with service. Professional codes define the meanings and practice of ethical precepts and help arbitrate when precepts conflict. An examination of the ethical codes of the American Library Association (ALA) and the Canadian Library Association (CLA) reveals the meaning of service in their constituent institutions.

The changing information technology available to society and shifting missions and institutional settings of libraries combine to determine the character of library service. Primordial librarians were bookkeepers for academic, religious, or political institutions (Rubin, 2004). The first ethical obligation in libraries was that of stewardship, protecting the collection from harm. Because the information technology of the time did not yet allow cheap printing and distribution of materials, the ethical precept of service, while existent, was necessarily subservient to that of stewardship (Preer, 2008). The invention of the printing press marked a fundamental shift in information technology, though it would take centuries before relatively inexpensive books became the norm. This new norm provoked the rise of new types of libraries in the United States (Rubin, 2004). In the 18th century, social libraries—formed “to assist self-improvement and the search for truth” (Rubin, 2004, p. 275)—and circulating libraries—with a mission to earn profit by distributing popular works—introduced the service models of education and meeting the public demand for entertaining materials, respectively (Rubin, 2004).

Public libraries rose to prominence in the 19th and 20th centuries. Again, service models expanded in accord with this new institution and the accompanying new mission to educate, entertain, and create better, more informed citizens (Rubin, 2004). However, while the basic mission of public libraries has remained the same, the profession's interpretation of service has significantly evolved over time.

At the founding of the ALA in 1876, Melvil Dewey declared librarians no longer to be mere bookkeepers but rather educators of their users. The primary role of service was to aid in this education through discretionary selection (Preer, 2008). Charles Knowles Bolton's 1909 "Librarian's Canon of Ethics" defined service with its literal meaning of "to serve," in this case the "duty of the librarian to serve trustees, staff, other librarians, and the public" (Preer, 2008, p. 7). Bolton's work strongly influenced the first ALA Code of Ethics for Librarians, approved in 1938, which also breaks down service along the lines of obligations to groups of people. All along, however, others in the profession sought to gain greater recognition of the importance of service to humanity, a commitment shared by other recognized professions. "A Librarian's Code," proposed by an ALA subcommittee in 1960 (but never approved), stated that "service was the defining shared value" of the librarian's multiple obligations (Preer, 2008, p. 15). In the period between the 1938 Code and the adoption of the Statement on Professional Ethics in 1975, service came to be defined by access and the obligations to serve multiple groups was supplanted by the obligation to serve higher values. Later revision followed the path laid down by the 1975 Statement: the rise of public libraries demanded an expansion of librarians' ethical precept of service to include "obligation to the local community, to the larger society, to their profession, [and] to the values it embodied" (Preer, 2008, p. 2).

Last amended in 1996, The ALA Library Bill of Rights' Right I explicitly identifies the target of service: "all people of the community the library serves" (American Library Association, 1939). Right VI also places service—in this case meeting room use—under the sphere of service to the public. However, a close examination of the text of the other rights in that document reveals other implied service targets.

Right II, in prescribing representation of all points of view and proscribing censorship, represents service to the ideal of intellectual freedom. A narrow interpretation on Right I could lead to the conclusion that materials that present views contradictory to the views of a library's local community should not be included in the collection. Right II, though, implies that a larger obligation exists, to follow the provisions of intellectual freedom in providing balanced viewpoints. Rights III and IV also deal with the idea of service to the ideal of intellectual freedom and Right V addresses another ideal, equal access (American Library Association, 1939).

The ALA Bill of Rights outlines guidelines of service to the local community and service to ideals. Often these two service targets will parallel each other but sometimes they will not. When they are in contradiction, service to ideals must overrule service to the local community. The rights of equality and intellectual freedom are inalienable—they can neither be abridged nor forfeited by local communities.

The 1997 ALA Code of Ethics prescribes equal access in Principle I. Principles I, III, IV, VI, and VII concern service and access; the other Principles address other service targets: ideals (intellectual freedom, privacy, intellectual property, and copyright holders), colleagues, employing institutions, and the library profession (American Library Association, 1997). The latter three targets are part of any profession's standard business ethics (Preer, 2008), but the first

target, service ideals of librarianship, is critical to the profession. The ALA Bill of Rights and Code of Ethics define service as meeting the needs of users, communities, institutions, and society while staying true to the ideals of librarianship.

The CLA's very concise Position Statement on Code of Ethics uses the word "service" just once, identifying the responsibility to "promote and maintain the highest possible range and standards of library service" (Canadian Library Association, 1976). Service in this context simply means helping others find knowledge, which is the central tenet of librarianship—Rubin writes that "bringing knowledge to people is the *sin qua non* of the profession" (2004, p. 304). Although this is the only explicit identification of service obligations in the Code, a broader examination reveals that the Code in its entirety is in keeping with Ranganathan's call for "service to the individual, community, and society as a whole" (as cited in Rubin, 2004, p. 309). The Code itself focuses on service to library users, addressing equality, access, and confidentiality. The Code also refers to the CLA Position Statement on Intellectual Freedom, though, which directly addresses libraries' obligations to Intellectual Freedom, Freedom of Expression, and other democratic ideals as part of their service to Canadian society (Canadian Library Association, 1974). As in the ALA ethical codes, the CLA documents prescribe service to users, institutions, society, and ideals. (Notably, however, the CLA does not identify local communities, or any other such unit between users and society, as a service target (Canadian Library Association, 1974, 1976). This may be indicative of different perceptions of the balance between local and national interest in Canadian and American societies.)

The ethical precept of service mostly deals with the here and now; the precept of stewardship is explicitly concerned with the future. Libraries are obligated to safeguard their collections from harm. Access, though, by its nature puts physical materials at risk: open stacks

risk theft and mishandling of materials, checkout (as opposed to in-house use) risks damage or loss, and allowing youths in the library increases the amount of damage and disorder the collection will sustain. According to Preer, “access to information is what library service is all about” (2008, p. 12). As such, aspects of service (embodied in access) are inherently in conflict with stewardship.

In so far as selection is a subset of service, it is another area where service inherently conflicts a different ethical precept, in this case intellectual freedom. Selection can take one of two paths: either materials are selected for their perceived truth or they are chosen for balance. The latter choice is ideal and in accord with the contemporary ethical guidelines but in practice is unobtainable. The simple reason for this fact is that all libraries have limited materials budgets and limited space for collections. Not every view can be equally represented in even the largest libraries, and smaller libraries face even greater constraints. Libraries balance their collections as best they can to fit their institutional missions but this balance represents a compromise between the service of selection and the ethical precept of intellectual freedom (Preer, 2008).

In modern times, librarians have defined service in terms of obligations to groups or in terms of service to values. Either way, there is the potential for conflict, not just between service and other ethical precepts, but also within the precept of service. If service is to multiple groups, then these groups can come into conflict—users versus staff, local community versus larger society, current users versus future ones. If service is to values, not individuals or groups, that raises the possibility of ideological conflicts. Democracies continue to debate the balance between personal rights and the good of society, as demonstrated by periodic battles in the public forum over issues censorship, privacy, free speech, intellectual property. Libraries may intend to

serve democratic society by serving its core values, but when these values are themselves contentious, service to one may conflict with service to another.

There are inherent conflicts between service and other ethical precepts. There are also conflicts inherent between different targets of service. While stewardship was by necessity of great importance through much of written history, changing information technologies and new missions for libraries have placed service at the forefront in modern libraries. This shift has been accompanied by changes in the way service is treated as an ethical precept. Today's libraries serve diverse targets, including users, staff, the library profession, local communities, and larger society. However, as made apparent by the codes of ethics of the ALA and CLA, they equally serve the ideals of the library profession.

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