Democratic theory in Library Information Science

Abstract: A recent article by Joseph Buschman regrets that democratic theory is an unfinished idea. The argument appears to assume an essential relationship between library information science (LIS) and democratic theory. Libraries services are important for undemocratic purposes also, and like other sociotechnical systems partake on the cultural context in which they are deployed.

Sir:

In his article "Democratic theory in Library Information Science: Toward an emendation" (August 2007, JASIST 58[10], pp. 1483-1496), Joseph Buschman notes that Thomas Jefferson in 1787 and James Madison in 1822 stressed the importance of newspapers and popular information for a liberal democratic government (p. 1483). He regrets that in Library Information Science (LIS) "democratic theory is an unfinished, truncated idea remaining at its Jeffersonian/Madisonian beginnings" (p. 1485), cites a wide range of authors as evidence of a chronic collective failure to develop "democratic theory" in LIS, and concludes with a forceful demand that "LIS must ask itself the question where it stands in this configuration and in relation to democracy" (p. 1493).

Buschman appears to assume (if I have understood the complex language of the article correctly) that there is an *essential* (meaning inherent) mutual relationship between democratic theory and LIS. I suggest that there is an different and simpler explanation.

When library systems and resources (or any other technologies) are deployed a socio-technical system is created. The "socio" component is shaped by the cultural context in which the technology is deployed, so library service would be democratic only accidentally through the happenstance of deployment within a democratic situation.

It is widely accepted that accessible public libraries with liberal collection development practices are important for the health of democratic political systems. But so is oil. More to the point, effective library services are also important for non-democratic political regimes. Lenin and his wife, N. K. Krupskaya, herself a librarian, thought so. Mussolini's Minister of Education was enthusiastic about the role of public libraries in evolving a new Fascist culture, and the Nazis had a vigorous and well-known interest in collection development.

Part of the problem in philosophical writings about libraries has been a failure (reflected in Danton's famous article of 1934) to distinguish between *philosophical analysis* (rigorous critical thought) and *a philosophy* (a set of motivating beliefs, concepts and values). The latter always pervades library service and it is not necessarily democratic. Different political regimes have different social agendas, so LIS will be differently deployed. Lenin wrote: "But we must build our own library–a library of a different kind, more in keeping with our socialist way of life." (Quoted in Simsova (1968, 46).

There are, I submit, two reasons for the lack of democratic theories of LIS. First, the assumption that LIS is essentially democratic has been explicitly refuted in at least one introductory LIS textbook (e.g. Buckland 1988, 155-161). Second, the general lack of developed

democratic *theories of* LIS (as distinct from the democratic *uses of* LIS) in the LIS literature, as documented by Buschman, implies that personified LIS has indeed revealed where it stands: The evidence indicates that writers have found it to be an unproductive line of inquiry.

　　　Abandoning the notion of a democratic theory of LIS would not end the possibilities for fruitful inquiry. There is ample scope for more work on the democratic *uses of* LIS--and if this is what Buschman meant, I agree with him. There is also, as I have suggested elsewhere (Buckland, 2003, 681-682), scope for examining whether library and other information and communication services are inherently subversive because they tend to lead to new ideas, but subversion is not always democratic in tendency.

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Michael K. Buckland
School of Information,
University of California,
Berkeley, CA 94720-4600