

# The Growth of the Profession

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*The article offers an account of the processes shaping the professionalization of college and research librarianship within the framework of four contemporary sociological theories. The author suggests that structural changes within higher education and within the information industry affect the legitimacy, status, and territory of librarians' work. Growth of the profession cannot be accomplished through the efforts of librarians alone. The profession is pressured by demands from the organizations in which the library operates, the changing nature of professional work, and competition from others to gain control of some areas of information work.*



his article offers an account of the processes shaping the professionalization of college and research librarianship. It does not address the question of whether academic librarianship is or will become a profession. Nor does it offer a history of college and research librarianship. Instead, it examines the arenas in which academic librarians struggle—the academic community and the wider information society—and the ways in which librarians strive to shape that environment to achieve professional growth. The article presents an interpretation of the dynamics of growth of the profession of college and research librarianship within the framework of contemporary sociological research on professions.

Occupational groups do not become professions simply by deciding and asserting that they are so, nor by some naturally occurring set of events. Those occupations that are regarded as professions achieve that recognition as a result of ongoing struggles to achieve control over their work, to control the external markets in which their services are delivered, and

to achieve social and political status. The medical profession provides painful illustrations of ways in which professional authority is fought for and maintained. Recent examples include lobbying and legislation regarding the rights of nurse-midwives and physicians' arguments with health maintenance organizations over autonomy in ordering medical procedures. The struggle for power is ongoing because the environment in which professionals practice changes constantly: new professional groups emerge, new technologies are invented, and the political environment shifts.

Similarly, the growth of college and research librarianship as a profession has involved a complex process of actions taken by librarians, shifts in roles and relations of librarians to others in their academic communities, and actions and demands by external bodies. When librarians speak of growth, they are concerned less with the question of how many librarians practice than with the question of "to what effect." Growth is understood to encompass increased status, increased autonomy, and increased control within the

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workplace and within society. In other words, growth includes recognition by others of the value of the profession and the opportunity to practice in ways that professionals believe to be most appropriate.

### THE SOCIOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Several recent sociological studies suggest ways of approaching the growth of professions and their struggle for control. Although these monographs give greatest attention to the medical and legal professions, their theoretical analyses provide important insights for the analysis of academic librarianship.

In this thoughtful study *Professions and Power*,<sup>1</sup> Terrence Johnson demonstrates the limits of those theories of professionalization that treat all occupational groups similarly and rank them according to the number of "professional traits" that they can claim or that they are in the process of obtaining. Johnson argues that professions vary widely according to the arenas in which they operate. He suggests that variations in power groupings within the profession, professional-client relationships, and the "levels of professionalization" of different occupational groups can only be explained by accounting "for variations in the institutional framework of professional practice."<sup>2</sup>

Eliot Freidson, who previously studied the ways in which physicians achieve autonomy and dominance, has recently turned to the examination of the relationship between knowledge and professional power. In his book, *Professional Powers: A Study of the Institutionalization of Formal Knowledge*, he distinguishes between a profession's formal body of knowledge, which is developed through basic research and taught within academic institutions, and the "working knowledge" that is employed by practitioners.<sup>3</sup> When professionals work in institutions, professional knowledge is transformed by the exigencies of the work environment. Professionals are influenced by administrative rules, the power of some clients, limited resources, and the like. Freidson says, My basic thesis is that the actual substance of

the knowledge that is ultimately involved in influencing human activities is different from the formal knowledge that is asserted by academics and other authorities whose words are preserved in the documents that are so frequently relied on.<sup>4</sup>

Magali Larson's 1977 work, *The Rise of Professionalism*, has a significantly different thesis: "professionalism [is] . . . an attempt to translate one order of scarce resources—special knowledge and skills—into another—social and economic rewards."<sup>5</sup> The characteristics of professions, such as formal training, credentialing, professional association, codes of ethics, and work autonomy, are significant because they contribute to and legitimate an occupation's claim to higher social status, and thereby to its ability to gain control over markets for its services.

Building on these theories but consciously diverging from them, Andrew Abbott in *The System of Professions*<sup>6</sup> addresses the limits of the concept of "professionalization" as presented by Freidson and Larson. He argues that it is useless to look at any one occupational group in isolation: professional groups develop interdependently. Furthermore, one must examine the connection between a profession and its work ("jurisdiction" in Abbot's terms)—and not merely the structure of the profession—if one wishes to reach an understanding of the growth of a profession. In a series of case studies, including one on the information professions, Abbot offers an alternative theory:

Each profession is bound to a set of tasks by ties of jurisdiction, the strengths and weaknesses of these ties being established in the process of actual professional work. Since none of these links is absolute or permanent, the professions make up an interacting system, an ecology. Professions compete within this system, and a profession's success reflects as much the situations of its competitors and the system structure as it does the profession's own efforts.<sup>7</sup>

In summary, these authors suggest that an understanding of the growth of college and research librarianship may be aided by examining (1) the external environment within which librarians practice; (2) working knowledge employed in practice;

(3) strategies used to increase professional status; and (4) the jurisdictions within which college and research libraries operate.

### THE EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENT

The pages of fifty years of *College & Research Libraries* provide a constant reflection of academic librarians' awareness of the environment within which they work. One could easily track the changing concerns of higher education by noting themes within the journal, e.g., the library's contribution to the war effort, the library's contribution to undergraduate education, and the library's contribution to the research community. Those issues of concern for the library range from changes within the higher education community to political and economic changes in society at large. The growth of the profession is not immune to any of these forces.

Arthur McAnally and Robert Downs called attention to many of the issues still critical to the internal academic community: information explosion, curricular demands generated by increasing interdisciplinary work, reductions in budget, and technological change.<sup>8</sup> These forces continue to challenge the profession; but they are now combined with rapid structural changes within the university driven by dramatic increases in capital and operating expenditures needed to support information technologies, research equipment, and personnel, and equally significant transformations in scholarly communication and information transfer facilitated by new technologies. Issues raised by McAnally and Downs remain for the profession but are compounded by these economic and technological forces.

#### *Administrative Changes*

The changing economic structure has led to closer administrative scrutiny of those facilities and services funded as unassessed overhead, e.g., the university library. In many institutions, units such as the publications office, the office of telecommunications, and even the development office now provide services only to

those departments that can afford to purchase them. Departments that once provided free services to other units as a public good now charge for those services. At the same time, most academic institutions are increasingly aggressive in examining ways to reallocate resources, as well as in seeking external sources of revenue from such sources as alumni or corporate partners.

Libraries have experienced fully these economic and technological changes as they have coped with increasing costs of materials and technology. Capital investments displace personnel lines; cataloging networks displace much on-site original cataloging and the type of staff performing it. The impact on professional staff appears to be profound. Ruth Hafter's study of cataloging professionals, library assistants, and administrators led her to conclude that "increased reliance in networks creates a trend toward the deprofessionalization of cataloging. Control over the organization and scheduling of work is shown to be shifting from cataloging departments to administrators."<sup>9</sup> She also found that work is being restructured to allow a lower level of personnel to perform tasks previously assigned to professionals. A current study of this author supports these findings and suggests that similar patterns are evident in public services.<sup>10</sup>

The profession is changing not only in its internal structure, but also in its relationships to its institutional base and its clients. Within the university, deans and directors of libraries are subject to the same shift in role that is being experienced by other academic administrators. In addition to being scholars, they are expected to have external visibility; entrepreneurial skills; and the ability to deal effectively with constituents and to raise funds from grants, contracts, and gifts. Although these political skills are possessed by a number of professional librarians, other academic administrators do not always associate these talents with the library profession. Search committees for academic librarians point to the success and visibility of people like Vartan Gregorian and James Billington and more readily look to

individuals outside librarianship to fill currently open dean- and directorships. Whether it is because individuals outside the profession are thought to appear more sophisticated when dealing with the rich and famous or whether librarians are not credited with being aggressive enough for the current academic arena, a battle about the importance of professional education for professional positions, thought to have been won several decades ago, has reemerged as the nature of the work has changed.

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#### *Shifting Client Relationships*

The changing political and economic climate of higher education has obvious implications for librarian/client relations and consequently for the growth of the profession. So, too, does the changing technological environment in which universities carry out their work.

As libraries seek solutions to the problem of how to fund expensive information systems, new power relationships with external clients have developed. The capital investment in an online catalog and the labor costs incurred in adapting a library's records result in significant dependence on the performance of vendors. Poor systems cannot be junked with the ease one might have discarded poorly constructed wood catalog drawers. Moreover, computer systems adopted by libraries may need to be integrated with systems from other libraries, with a university accounting system, with the computing center's operations, or with other institutional or external technologies. When this occurs, the library's operations become increasingly bound up with the operations of campus and/or state systems. At the same time, professional staff develop a new

form of dependency on vendors and the institution. Choices must be made that satisfy these external bodies. When differences of opinion occur, factors beyond professional judgment affect decisions.

The new information technologies employed by libraries are also changing professional relationships with users. Online public access catalogs and remote access to bibliographic and textual information distance the particular library from its local clientele. If the OPAC provides data for many libraries, the limitations of the local library's collection become less critical. When users gain access to information resources through remote systems, their relationships with library professionals and with the physical collection begin to change. These developments may enhance clients' regard for academic librarians if (1) users recognize the complexities of retrieving information from these new systems and (2) librarians' professional expertise is employed in systems development. It is equally likely that developments to increase the quality of end-user searching may reduce use (and therefore the perceived value) of the professional intermediary.

Freidson notes the importance of client control to the growth and status of a profession. Professionals who can determine the course of treatment, or even whether one should be treated at all, wield immense power. That power is consciously given over by the client; and as that is done, the client effectively recognizes the authority of the professional. It could be easily argued that new information technologies have given librarians more opportunity for control of their clients because new systems require greater expertise in design and implementation, but it is not necessarily evident to a user of such systems the extent to which librarians' expertise and control is affecting their use.

#### *The Extra-university Environment*

Academic libraries have always been affected by changes in the publishing industry, in the copyright law, and in the policies of the suppliers of such goods as library furniture. In recent years the economic and legal systems have assumed

even greater importance in library operations due to the shifts in ways in which information is stored and retrieved. Government decisions about copyright, about telecommunications regulation and tariff rates, and about ways in which data will be collected and disseminated are having a significant impact on user services. Such decisions affect more than the cost of and means of access to certain materials. They are influencing the form of publication and even what government information is disseminated in a nonproprietary fashion. The professional voice in these decisions is muffled by the government's concern for profit over access. The level of professional control and influence over significant policy matters has been diminished.

Professionals also struggle in their relationship to the private sector, particularly with vendors from whom they purchase equipment. The mutual dependence of librarians and suppliers of books, materials, and supplies is long-standing; but the capital required for an automated system (and the ongoing expense of maintaining it) significantly changes the relationship between buyer and seller. First, the professional expertise of library staff only partially determines a final decision. University decisions about technology, demands from consortia with which the library cooperates, and the amount of money available for purchasing the system are among the factors that limit the professional decision. Second, when a vendor sells a system to a library, the relationship does not end. Installation, maintenance, system support, and development of enhancements are expected from the vendor. Third, one sale to one institution can represent several months' profit for a small systems developer. Alternatively, some library purchases that may represent a significant investment for the library may be trivial for the vendor.

In the current environment, the relationship between librarians and vendors is complex—sometimes hostile and sometimes collaborative.<sup>11</sup> The ability of professionals to articulate their needs and to exert professional control will be more a function of the money the library is able to spend than of the strength of the argument. Library professionals are weakened

in their individual roles but achieve strength in community. As Susan Baerg Epstein notes, "The library community is unique in the degree of communication among its members. One library tells another library—everything. A vendor cannot work in this field without acknowledging and respecting this professional interaction."<sup>12</sup>

#### LEGITIMACY: WORKING KNOWLEDGE VS. PROFESSIONAL KNOWLEDGE

Within this institutional framework, academic librarians are challenged to maintain their intellectual claim for legitimacy as professionals. A recent book by Michael Winter<sup>13</sup> seeks to identify the characteristics of librarianship as a profession. Beginning with the assertion that "professionalization . . . is rooted in the much larger development of the growth of occupational expertise and the use of human service,"<sup>14</sup> the author defines that expertise by saying it is "the maintenance of culture through maintenance of access to knowledge records . . . that legitimates that authority of librarianship as an occupation."<sup>15</sup> Few would argue about the validity of this assertion. An understanding of collection, preservation, organization, and dissemination of information in the service of maintaining access to knowledge records [information] provides the knowledge base of the library profession. But the changes occurring from without the profession—and even on its behalf—raise questions about how professional expertise is employed.

Demands on the director for entrepreneurial skills place that individual in the service of the profession; but the expertise that she or he employs is rarely the expertise of the professional librarian. Friedson notes this phenomenon in all professions:

Some administrative and managerial positions are mandated to members of professions and must be classified as professions. They are a function of professions' efforts to preserve their control by using their own members to mediate between practitioners and the surrounding social environment."<sup>16</sup>

Those librarians who do hold responsibility to employ professional knowledge

in such positions as collection managers or original catalogers also are limited in how they use that knowledge. They are limited in their authority to allocate resources, and they are limited by the use of professional expertise from outside the library. Friedson makes a critical distinction about the nature of professional autonomy:

Professional employees possess technical autonomy or the right to use discretion and judgment in the performance of their work. . . . Furthermore, within certain limits, they must be able to select the work they do and decide how to do it. The limits, however, are set by management's resource allocation decisions. In the former sense they are autonomous, possessing a distinct measure of freedom and independence on the job that conventional workers lack. . . . In the latter sense, however, they are helpless and dependent because they have no control over the "economy" of the organization that employs them.<sup>17</sup>

To the extent that responsibility for obtaining resources and for allocating them is removed from those making professional decisions, the professional role is limited.

Within individual libraries the professional role is increasingly limited by what might be called the migration of expertise. Changes in cataloging practice provide the best example of this. The increasing proportion of cataloging done by professionals from other libraries may increase the level of expertise required by a few catalogers in any one library, but the important relationship to users has shifted. When cataloging was done in-house, there was the possibility of a strong connection between the professional and the user. Understanding of the needs of the user and the library's unique collection was part of professional expertise. Not only are there fewer of those professional experts in any one library now, but there is also the loss of that expert connection between user, collection, and professional knowledge about bibliographic control. The level of expertise required by any one cataloger may now be greater, but it is employed in a different context and there are recent suggestions that this migration is leading to a lowering of professional standards.<sup>18</sup>

Legitimacy of a profession is also depen-

dent on the relationship between the academic institutions that educate professionals and the professionals who practice (and who may also conduct research). The academic knowledge system provides legitimation, research, and instruction as well as new treatments, diagnoses, and inferences for practitioners. In doing so it helps shape professional work and the territory in which the profession operates.

The critical issue for the growth, and even survival, of a profession is to maintain a strong connection between academic knowledge and knowledge in practice. When the academic work in which a profession is based becomes too distanced from the practitioners, it no longer serves the important legitimating function. (Some suggest that this is happening in the law.) When professionals in practice make decisions too far removed from the research base, their claim to professional status based on specialized knowledge can be challenged. (Some see evidence of this in contemporary psychotherapy.) As the conduct of academic library work is changed by environmental conditions and new technologies, so, too, is the work within schools of library and information science. The ability of the academic library research community and practitioners to maintain strong links with one another will affect the legitimacy of the profession in the future.

#### STATUS:

#### STRATEGIES AND ENVIRONMENT

The relative status of librarianship has been an ongoing concern of its members. Status—that intangible measure of respect accorded by society to an individual or group—is valued not only for reasons of self-esteem. Many librarians recognize that higher status in our capitalist, status-conscious society is a reflection of and can be used to enhance economic and political power. However much one might wish to dismiss existing rankings of occupational status because of disagreement with the values inherent in them, it is impossible to disentangle the issue of status from the issue of the growth of the profession.

In our society the status of a profession is linked to the tasks it performs, the status of the institutions with which it is con-

nected, and the status of the clients it serves. The tasks of college and research librarianship have become increasingly valued since World War II with the discovery of the value of information and the growth of research institutions.<sup>19</sup> More recently, recognition by major corporations of the value of managing information has helped raise the status of all those who can connect their work with information management. At the same time, academic librarians have not always been the beneficiaries of this new perspective. The unresolved debate about faculty status for librarians, driven in part by the persistent belief of many teaching/research faculty that librarians are not full faculty, remains.<sup>20</sup> As vendors push end-user searching and universities deliver information services through individual departments and the computer center, the relationship between the library and information delivery may be even less clear to library users. It is not sufficient for the tasks to be more valued; the tasks must also be associated with the particular profession. It is not surprising, therefore, that a major issue for academic librarians recently has been to assert the importance of the information intermediary and bibliographic instruction and more particularly, on some campuses, to work to be linked to the position of information "czar."

Within the profession at large, the differentiation of librarians by the type of institution in which they work has benefited college and research librarians due to the higher status accorded by society to academic institutions and faculty. Measures of perception of the relative status of types of library repeatedly rank academic librarianship above school and public librarianship. Service to higher-status clients is associated with higher professional status.

Academic librarians themselves have contributed to this process in various ways, such as (1) differentiating the higher-status institutions from others through development of the Association for Research Libraries; (2) differentiating college and research librarianship from other library professionals by holding separate ACRL meetings; and (3) seeking higher-status benefactors for the library

through corporate partnerships, individual giving, and friends groups. While it would be inaccurate to say that the process of differentiation between types of librarians and types of libraries has been carried out for reasons of professional growth, it is nonetheless true that that process benefits certain segments of the college and research library profession.

While increased status may help librarians gain added resources for their institutions, the factors that relate to that increased status may work against the profession in other ways. For example, higher professional status is related to greater control over clients, but higher-status clients may be less likely to give over authority to professional experts. A librarian working at Harvard may have high status within the library profession but have relatively limited scope for professional work within an institution in which the users think they are the experts in information seeking. And just as librarians work to increase their status by relating their work to the information age, so too do other workers within the academic environment.

### THE PROFESSION'S JURISDICTION

The growth of the profession must be related to the scope of its work and to the territory in which that work is carried out; yet this is not easily done. The structure and scope of work are changing and shifting among different professions. The territorial boundaries are becoming blurred, leading to increasing possibilities of border dispute. Questions about jurisdictions are raised within the profession itself, between units within the college or university in which librarians work, and even between the library and outside organizations.

Some of the changes in professional work have already been noted in the previous section on professional knowledge, but there are other aspects to these changes. Academic librarians readily admit that tasks previously performed by paraprofessionals are now being carried out by student workers. Professional jobs are being done by paraprofessionals and

the nature of professional work is changing. Such changes raise questions about not only the knowledge base anchoring the profession but also the jurisdiction of professional workers.

Abbott notes that there is always overlap in tasks performed between categories of workers. Nurses may determine appropriate medication. Executives may type their own letters. Paralegals may do most of the research on a case. But to say that the phenomenon of overlapping job performance is common to all professions does not dismiss it as an issue for the growth of college and research librarianship. Prior to installation of computerized systems in libraries, there was relative clarity about what was and was not professional work. Cataloging and reference were, for example, clearly the domain of professionals. That is no longer true for the profession as a whole. My current research, for example, reveals significantly different institutional patterns about the work of professionals. In some academic libraries, reference is reserved solely for professionals. In others a decision has been made to staff reference with paraprofessionals.

Increasingly, libraries need to hire professional workers who are not librarians. These include systems analysts, development officers, and human resource managers: people with professional expertise vital to the library's growth but not necessarily related to the knowledge base of the profession. This situation raises different questions about professional domain.

Questions about jurisdiction within the wider educational community can be illustrated by asking questions such as, "Where will 1990 census materials reside and who will be the intermediary for users?" When academic librarians are asked this question, a variety of answers are offered. In some institutions the sociology department or statistical services unit will provide access to the data and assistance in interpretation. In some the computer services office will house the data, but other units, including the library, will be responsible for user assistance.

The variety of answers suggests several things. First, libraries do not have a well-recognized claim to providing access to all

types of information regardless of form. And second, the ways in which new formats of information are handled are partially determined by institutional history and the relative strength of different campus units.

The academic library's role in providing access to new forms of information is also a function of power and politics. Those same economic forces within higher education that are changing the professional role of library director lead to competition among individual campus units for money, prestige, and visibility. When IBM promoted access to DIALOG to the University of Illinois' division of administrative computing, the computer services office, and the library, each unit demonstrated interest.

While libraries seek to provide coherent access to information regardless of form, computer centers seek new territory to compensate for the demise of mainframe computing and shifting patterns of use. The mergers of library and computing centers are seen as a logical way to address the problem of boundaries. Few organizations, however, have successfully carried out a merger. In fact, mergers raise new issues about the professional role of the librarian.<sup>21</sup>

Finally, intrauniversity questions about jurisdiction are compounded by the encroachment of information services from organizations outside the academic community. Faculty and students who subscribe directly to BRS or DIALOG or who are able to gain access to other academic libraries through an online catalog no longer have the same professional relationship to their home institution. It is not simply that library users seek out alternative suppliers. The publishers of *Chemical Abstracts* and other similar organizations aggressively seek out new markets and intentionally compete with professionals within the academic setting.

At present both competition and conflict characterize relationships between academic librarians and others who wish to deliver information services to members of the academic community. As new forms of information technology create openings for academic librarians, there



are opportunities for significant professional growth. At the same time professionals in other academic units are exploiting ways in which information technologies can be used to enhance their own growth. Differences in the resolutions to these territorial disputes among institutions of higher education will depend on how they decide to structure relationships between potentially competing units.

### Implications

This discussion suggests that growth of college and research librarianship is not entirely within the control of its members. Moreover, because adequate resources are critical for the delivery of high-quality library services and because the political and economic models that shape resource allocation within our society and within our institutions are capitalist models, the library profession is in a profoundly difficult position. To continue to grow as a profession necessitates continued, and probably increased, involvement in competition for status and territory. If librarians do not compete, other groups will look for ways they can increase their own status and territory through involvement in library and information services. Not to compete, or not consciously to seek growth, may lead to a profound loss of even basic library services.

The cost of growth may be high because it may mean casting off certain services, certain types of clients, certain standards of practice, and even certain of our colleagues. There are pressures to violate the ethical principles of equality of service that underly the profession. If librarians become dependent on individuals and organizations with money to support services, there are incentives to skew services to those with greater resources. As noted above, the cost of increasing status may be separation from lower-status groups, even within the profession. The cost of increasing the academic library's market share may entail entering directly into competition with alternative providers.

Although these are possible consequences, it is important to recognize that the profession need not violate its fundamental principles as it strives for growth.

Strategies of integrity adopted in the past continue to help the profession grow. These include the work of the Association of College and Research Libraries, the growth of other organizations such as ARL, and the formation of various user groups.

One of *College & Research Libraries* original goals was to promote professional growth. In the first editorial it was asserted that *C&RL* was established to provide a *professional voice*, which would "help to develop the ACRL into a strong and mature organization."<sup>22</sup> The journal provides, among other things, a means for consolidating the opinions of academic librarians, for building a knowledge base for the field, and for informing those outside of the scope and status of the profession.

College and research librarians also exert professional control through their involvement in the legislative process, although they have been criticized for not being as active as they should. Harold Shills notes that:

Impressive though the overall growth in Legislative Day involvement may be, academic librarians still comprise only 7 percent of the total number of persons participating in 1987. Given ACRL's status as the largest division of ALA, the large number of national issues affecting academic libraries, and the high stakes involved in those issues, the level of Legislative Day participation by academic librarians has been undesirably low.<sup>23</sup>

The type of education provided professionals continues to be critical to professional growth. In 1958 Paul Wasserman espoused the value and importance of teaching library administration.<sup>24</sup> Today it could be argued that there is equal value in teaching administration of higher education, with an emphasis on such factors as environmental scanning, strategic planning, and marketing of services. The educational system also provides a critical gateway as it admits individuals to professional programs and socializes them into the expectations of the profession.

Abbott concludes his discussion of the information professions by asking about the current structure of professionalism for information workers, a category he

construes broadly. He suggests,

All the professions in the information area will follow the prior example of statistics, market research, and computing itself. They will end up as small, elite professions with intellectual jurisdictions over large areas. In these areas they will oversee commodified professional knowledge executed by paraprofessionals, serving the elite clients directly themselves.<sup>25</sup>

Such a conclusion seems premature. The growth of the profession depends on many factors beyond the control of its members, but that is true for all profes-

sions, not just college and research librarianship. The changes in the economic structure of colleges and universities and the revolution in information technologies clearly drive many broader changes that affect this profession, but the future is not scripted. The growth of the profession will also be shaped by members themselves, both individuals acting alone within their local institutions and, more importantly, individuals acting in concert as a profession to achieve the goal of providing effective access to information for all users.

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