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Libraries and open society; Popper, Soros and digital information

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of libraries and information services, in promoting the 'open society' espoused by Karl Popper and George Soros. After a brief discussion of the nature of an 'open society', the paper covers the role played by provision of knowledge and information, of new technology, particularly the Internet, and of critical thinking and digital literacy in the development of this form of society. Conclusions are drawn for the role of libraries and librarians, with seven general principles suggested:

- provision of access to a wide variety of sources without 'negative' restriction or censorship
- provision of 'positive' guidance on sources, based on open and objective criteria
- a recognition that a 'free flow of information' though essential, is not sufficient
- a recognition that provision of factual information, while valuable, is not enough
- a need for a specific concern for the effect of new ICTs, and the Internet in particular
- promotion of critical thinking and digital literacy
- a need for explicit consideration of the ethical values of libraries

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to examine the role which may be played by libraries, and similar information providers, in promoting the kind of open society espoused by Karl Popper and George Soros. The nature of an 'open society' is first outlined briefly, before a discussion of the role played by provision of knowledge and information in the development of this form of society, the role of new information and communication technologies (ICTs), particularly the Internet, and the importance of critical thinking and information (or digital) literacy. Finally conclusions are drawn for the role of libraries and librarians.

The 'library' as used in this paper should be taken to include 'information services', 'knowledge centres', and all institutions of that kind. Similarly, the terms 'information' and 'knowledge' are generally used synonymously.

The nature of open society

Although the term 'open society' was first used by the French philosopher Henri Bergson, its modern conception stems largely from the work of Sir Karl Popper, particularly as expressed in his well-known *Open Society and its Enemies*, first published in 1945. He proposed, in essence, a form of social organisation based on the recognition that nobody has access to the ultimate truth; our understanding of the world is imperfect, and a perfect society is unattainable. An open society is the best attainable solution; an imperfect society, which is capable of infinite improvement. In Popper's eyes, the enemies of open society were totalitarian, closed regimes; specifically the communist and fascist dictatorships of the early and mid- twentieth century.

Popper did not, however, identify open society with any specific political or economic system, and open society is not to be automatically equated with current Western democracy (Notturmo 2000).

This concept was extended and somewhat amended by the financier and philanthropist George Soros. In particular, Soros noted that totalitarian closed societies are only one form of antithesis of the open society; an anarchic, uncontrolled capitalism, or the weak states resulting from the collapse of a closed society, is another. 'I now envisage open society occupying a precarious middle ground where it is threatened by dogmatic beliefs of all kinds, some that would impose a closed society, others leading to the disintegration of society. Open society represents near-equilibrium conditions; alternatives include not only the static disequilibrium of closed society but also a dynamic disequilibrium.' (Soros 1998, p70)

Soros has put his ideas into practice through a network of Open Society Foundations, aimed at promoting the idea of open society in various countries, most particularly in the formerly socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia; details of the Foundations and their programmes may be found at <http://www.soros.org>.

Considerations of knowledge and information play an important part in the thought of both Popper and Soros. Popper's political philosophy developed very much from this analyses of the philosophy of science, and specifically the growth of scientific knowledge; indeed Popper's concept of objective knowledge has been regarded as a foundation stone for information science (Brookes 1980). Popper's emphasis is on the human ability to learn, and thereby to gain valid and useful knowledge, even though that knowledge is necessarily imperfect: 'thus we can *learn*, we can grow in *knowledge*, even if we can never *know* - that is, know for certain. Since we can learn, there is no reason for despair of reason: and since we can never know, there are no grounds for smugness or conceit over the growth of our knowledge (Popper 1966, vol. 2, p 383) [Popper's italics]

For Soros, too, knowledge and information are important considerations for an open society. He regards the current global capitalist system as a distorted form of open society. This system, and the traditional market doctrine, suggest that, with perfect information, markets will take care of themselves, returning to their 'natural' position of equilibrium; 'the main task [of ensuring that markets work properly] is to make the necessary information available and to avoid any interference with the market mechanism' (Soros 1998, p175-176) But Soros demonstrates that this is not a valid analysis of how markets truly work; the phenomenon of 'reflexivity', noted later, leads to a

more sophisticated relationship between information and the operation of the market, and, by extension, society.

Open societies, Soros reminds us, consist of 'encumbered individuals', by contrast with the unencumbered individuals of the enlightenment philosophers 'the thinking of encumbered individuals is formed by their social setting, their family and other ties, the culture in which they are reared. They do not occupy a timeless, perspectiveless position. They are not endowed with perfect knowledge ..' (Soros 1998, p92)

The role of information and knowledge in the open society is then somewhat paradoxical; perfect knowledge is denied to anyone, or any group or movement, but the provision of information, for learning and the growth of knowledge, is of great importance. Practically, this is recognised within the operation of Soros's Foundations by the establishment of several Programmes related to information and communication, notably the Library, Internet, Media and Publishing Programmes [details from <http://www.soros.org>].

Information and knowledge in open societies

Given the importance of information and knowledge, and their communication, within open societies, it is reasonable to ask whether any particular kind of knowledge, or information resource, is associated with this form of society (which may be turned into the practical question, what should libraries, as an important form of information provider, be providing to promote open society). This will lead us, in this and following sections, to the identification of seven general principles underlying the role of libraries in open societies.

Popper's answer to the question of the 'best' sources of knowledge is unequivocal, and derives from the very basis of this thought:

'The principle that *everything is open to criticism* (from which this principle itself is not exempt) leads to a simple solution of the problem of the sources of knowledge ... It is this: every 'source' - tradition, reason, imagination, observation, or what not - is admissible, and may be used, *but none has any authority* .. every source is welcome, but no statement is immune from criticism, whatever its 'source' may be.' (Popper 1966, vol. 2, p 378) [Popper's italics].

Popper develops this theme further in his 'Conjectures and Refutations'; while his arguments deal with 'sources' in the broadest sense, he makes it clear here that written sources have a particular significance:

'There are all kinds of sources of our knowledge, *but none has authority* ... most of our assertions are based not on observations, but upon all kinds of other sources. 'I read it in *The Times*' or perhaps 'I read it in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* is a more likely and a more definite answer to the question 'How do you know ?' than 'I have observed it' or 'I know it from an observation I made last year'. (Popper 1974, p 21) [Popper's italics]

Popper argues that we should not try to argue for the correctness of a view from its source, but rather criticise the assertion itself - using any and all other sources as necessary. Notturmo (2000, p 136) interprets this as meaning that an appropriate authority should be the first word, not the last word, in a critical enquiry.

We may see from this that the basic tenet should be that any and all sources should be available within an open society framework [*principle 1*]; it is not, and cannot be, the function of the librarian, or any other information provider, to restrict access to sources, according to what is their judgement of what is 'best'. Their knowledge and understanding, like that of all other participants is imperfect, and restricting access to their chosen selection of sources, regardless of their expertise and high motivation, runs counter to the basic principles of open society.

This general idea needs to be qualified in two ways. First, it will be obvious that librarians, and other information providers, must in practice make choices as to what information products may be provided, if only on grounds of restrictions of budgets, space etc. However, such choices must be made openly and transparently, and in the clear knowledge that they are enforced choices, and not

choices made according to the provider's ideas of what the users 'should' want or need. Second, this general principle does not prevent librarians from using their best judgement as to what will be most useful and acceptable to the users of information, and promoting and recommending this, as librarians have done from time immemorial; so long as this does not turn into restriction and censorship. Indeed, we should remember Soros's idea of open societies consisting of 'encumbered individuals', noted earlier; it will be essential for librarians to respect the encumbered individual, by providing information and knowledge relevant to their situation. Authoritative views may be useful as Notturmo (2000, p 136) puts it, 'to discover how things stand in a field, what its major problems are, and which of the solutions that have been proposed seem most promising'. This will not violate the general principle of providing a variety of sources, and refraining from giving *de novo* authority to any of them, providing that it is done in a positive manner, by recommending certain sources from the many available, rather than in a negative manner of restriction and censorship [*principle 2*].

It may be objected that this is an unrealistic and naïve viewpoint, since it flies in the face of the obvious fact that in many subject areas - science, medicine and law being obvious example - there are certain works which are regarded as particularly 'authoritative', and hence worthy of recommendation. However, describing such sources as authoritative is simply short-hand for their possession of a variety of desirable, and objective, characteristics: authorship by qualified persons, careful editing and checking factual data, regular updating, etc. Such criteria can be, and should be, used by librarians in justifying their recommendation of such works as useful; and users may judge for themselves whether they are sensible and valid. This is entirely different from the simple uncritical statement that a particular work is authoritative.

A refusal to restrict access to sources amounts to support for a free flow of information, which Soros describes as 'perhaps the most potent force for democracy ... which makes it difficult for governments to misinform the people' (Soros 1998, p111). This free flow of information is easily suppressed, if the government controls the media; or, according to circumstances, controls access to any other forms of the communication of information. But, simply allowing a free flow of information is inadequate, in itself, to uphold open society: 'In any case, the free flow of information will not necessarily impel people towards democracy, especially when people living in democracies do not believe in democracy as a universal principle' (Soros 1998, p111).

The implication of this for libraries and other information providers is that allowing free access to all relevant sources of information is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for them to be contributing to the development of open society [*principle 3*]. A more pro-active role is required. This kind of a role has more commonly been assumed by libraries and information centres in the private sector, rather than by public libraries and information services, but there are indications that this is changing in many countries. A particularly interesting example is the Estonian situation, described by Virkus (2000), where a 1998 Parliamentary decree on principles of information policy specifies that 'information must be provided actively and systematically and, as a whole, be easy to comprehend'.

There is a further consideration, and that is George Soros' concept of 'reflexivity'. Soros argues that statements whose truth value is indeterminate are, far from being meaningless as was claimed by the logical positivists, are even more significant than statements whose truth value is known. The latter constitute knowledge, helping us to understand the world as it is. The former, expressions of our inherently imperfect understanding, help to shape the world. This is because of their reflexive character, and includes most generalisations of history, e.g. Soros' (1998 p 13) example 'the common interest is best served by allowing people to pursue their own interests'. Reflexivity implies that participants make statements about the world, to form a picture which corresponds with reality, but their thoughts and statements also help to mould, change and create reality; statements may alter the subject matter to which they refer.

The implication here is that libraries should not just be 'information banks' providing chunks of knowledge, important though this function is for the operation of open society, and in particular should attempt to avoid giving any impression that they are providing the definitive answer to any question, other than relatively trivial factual matters. They should also provide, and make it clear that they are providing, 'thought-provoking' material as an aid to the reflexive process [*principle 4*]. This is a further argument, if one were needed, for the provision of a variety of perspectives and viewpoints, including those which are plainly contradictory, within a range of information sources.

New ICTs and open societies

The increased significance of new information and communication technologies, and the Internet in particular, has created a new information landscape within which libraries must operate, and which has strong and pervasive implications for society, and well as for the specifics of information provision [*principle 5*].

Though Karl Popper's major works were written long before the advent of these particular ICTs, he nonetheless showed a remarkable understanding of the possible effects of changing information technology on society: 'We could conceive of a society in which men practically never meet face to face - in which all business is conducted by individuals in isolation who communicate by typed letters or by telegrams, and who go about in closed motor cars' (Popper 1966, vol. 1 p 174). Written in 1945, this encapsulates Popper's idea of an 'abstract society', one of the possible ends of an open society, as it leaves the 'tribal' closed society. There are strong negative aspects to this, but Popper also sees gains, for example the possibility of new personal relationships, independent of birth or location.

George Soros, writing with the knowledge of the effect of global communications and computer networks, sees the emergence of the 'transactional society', something very divorced from, and inimical to, an open society. In a 'transactional' society, individual transactions replace lasting relationships; each transaction stands on its own, and there is no sense of loyalty or worthwhile on-going interactions between the parties. The replacement of relationships by transactions in the business world, Soros believes, is an on-going historical process, which is well-advanced; he notes the advent of the Internet as one contributing factor.

A transactional society suffers from a lack of social values. If everything, including professional life, is judged by money made, then open society, which relies on common social values, is not possible. This is exemplified by work carried out by the Soros Foundation in the USA on the increased 'business ethic' in law, medicine and similar areas, in which 'market values have penetrated into areas of society that were previously governed by non-market considerations' (Soros 1998, p73). The pressures of the market place also affect journalism and publishing: 'ethical standards once thought intrinsic are not standing up very well to market pressures' (Soros 1998, p236).

The transactional society is bound to affect the services of libraries and similar information providers, inasmuch as their activities and benefits are judged largely or wholly in monetary terms. Impersonal services, including the increasingly prevalent digital transactions, though efficient, may not always be appropriate. Libraries may need increasingly to consider an explicit founding of their services on relationships rather than transactions, as much as possible. It also seems clear that the ethical standards of libraries and librarians may be as much under pressure as those of equivalent, perhaps higher profile, professions, and may need particular thought. Horvat (2000) gives an example of how such considerations may need explicit consideration in library training programmes.

Among new ICTs, the Internet is the most prominent, and is usually thought of as a democratising medium, and hence as a generally positive force toward open society. Typical is the view of Paul Gilster (1977, p42):

'The power of the Internet come from the fact that [its] connections are decentralised. No one of these machines, no cluster of networks, can be said to run the enterprise. Democracy prevails: I can publish a message on the Internet as readily as you. I can choose which topics to read about and switch off those that don't interest me. I can navigate the information space by making choices, running searches for keywords, and displaying content. Depending on my interests, I can become a content provider or remain a reader, meaning that what I get out of the Internet is very much a matter of personal preference. No one other than myself makes the choices about what I see.'

But the Internet displays several negative features, which should be of concern to those wishing to see it as a positive force. Most obvious is its sheer volume of material, much of which is generally agreed to be of poor quality at best, often seemingly partial, biased and inaccurate. The occurrence of pornographic, racist and similar undesirable material is also well publicised. These factors may lead to calls for restriction of access, to 'protect' users from these undesirable features. It need hardly be said that this goes against the general principles of free access enunciated above, and should be rejected if the Internet is to be a useful tool for promotion of open societies. The answers to these problem are

likely to be multi-faceted, but should take the form of positive encouragement and empowerment of users, rather than negative restriction and censorship. One example is digital literacy, or information literacy, enabling users to apply critical rationality to the mass of material on the internet, to select that which is of value to them; this is discussed later. Another example is the creation of 'quality gateways', guiding users to Internet sites of particular value, and indicating *why* they are of value; these are usually organised along subject lines (Robinson and Bawden 1999), but could also be adopted for particular countries or communities.

Finally, another potential danger of the Internet is its homogenising effect, whereby all information sources are presented through a common interface, and with a common 'look and feel'; thereby removing the familiar visual and tactile clues to quality and relevance present in printed material. Helping users - the 'encumbered individuals' of open societies - to overcome this, and deal confidently with Internet sources, this an important aspect of digital literacy.

Information literacy / Digital literacy for open societies

'Information literacy' is a term dating back to the 1970s, and having a variety of meanings, though generally implying the ability to make effective use of information sources, including analysing and evaluating information, and organising and using it in a individual or group context (Bawden 2000, Snavely and Cooper 1997, Behrens 1994). The list of six components of information literacy according to the American Library Association is typical:

- recognising a need for information
- identifying what information would address a particular problem
- finding the needed information
- evaluating the information found
- organising the information
- using the information effectively in address the specific problem

The term 'digital literacy' has been used more recently, to encompass the situation where networked resources are a significant part of those available (Gilster 1997, Bawden 2000), and includes such skills as 'hypertextual navigation' and 'knowledge assembly'.

These ideas have received considerable publicity in the late 1990s, with one leading commentator arguing that 'companies, organisation, countries and societies that ignore the need to improve information literacy will not be in a position to compete effectively in the new information age' (Oxbrow 1998).

From what has been said above, it will be clear that the promotion of information, or digital, literacy will be a necessary function of any library service aspiring to promote open society. But the link is, in fact, more direct and basic, and stems from the idea of *critical thinking* as an important part of information literacy (Bawden 2000, Arp 1995). Maloy (1998) explicitly links the need for librarians to promote critical thinking for evaluation of sources as a necessary complement to the provision of open access to all materials.

In the information literacy context, critical thinking usually implies:

- asking informed questions
- posing problems in various ways before attempting to solve them
- examining assumptions
- solving ill-structured, 'messy' problems
- evaluating sources of information
- assessing the quality of one's own thinking and problem-solving
- using mental frameworks to give context to a mass of information

However, the idea of critical thinking, or rational criticism, has a considerably longer history, and is a fundamental part of the thinking of Popper and Soros on open societies. For them, it is the means of continually improving our always imperfect understanding, and thus a vital part of the establishment and improvement of open societies. Notturmo (2000, p 51) suggests that 'the most important tradition in an open society is the tradition of critical thinking'. The original mission of the Soros Open Society Foundation in 1979 was threefold: to help open up closed societies; to render open societies more viable; and to foster a critical mode of thinking (Soros 1998, p235). With the passing of events, particularly the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the concentration is now on the second and third aspects (Soros 1998, p 235).

We can therefore see that the promotion of critical thinking, within the context of information, or digital, literacy is a fundamental role for any library aiming to promote open society [*principle 6*]. Not only is it a necessary tool in helping users deal with the variety of sources, which we have argued must be provided without restriction if the aims of open society are to be upheld, but it also enables libraries to make a direct and active contribution to one of the fundamental requirements of an open society; that its citizens should be able to apply critical thinking to their own knowledge, and to information relevant to their own situations.

Libraries in open societies

From a consideration of the basic concepts of open society, we have, so far, established six general principles which may guide libraries seeking to support the establishment and maintenance of open societies:

- provision of access to a wide variety of sources without 'negative' restriction or censorship
- provision of 'positive' guidance, based on open and objective criteria, towards sources relevant to the situation and needs of 'encumbered individuals'
- a recognition that a 'free flow of information' though essential, is not sufficient
- a similar recognition that provision of factual information, while valuable, is not enough
- a need for a specific concern for the effect of new ICTs, and the Internet in particular
- promotion of critical thinking, within a framework of information, or digital, literacy

There has been surprisingly little explicit discussion of issues of this sort in the librarianship literature - Hannabuss (1998) gives a recent review - although a belief in the library as a positive force for a healthy society has often been voiced as a 'given'. Examples range from a statement from the New Zealand Library Association (1952):

'[The library] can be the most valuable instrument of democracy and good citizenship. Where no library exists, books written by zealots and propagandists, and newspapers which tend to be sensational, can be potent weapons of subversion. But a good library service providing material in open, well-balanced, many-sided collections .. can help to make democracy sane, informed, stable and real'

to the views of Murison (1988) on the British public library service:

'The total significance of the of the public library is fundamentally its influence on all the individuals who comprise a community and on the relationship of these people with one another .. the importance of public libraries can be measured by the effect for good they have on society.'

Statements of this sort have usually been made in the context of the public library service; Kerslake and Kinnell (1998) review, and update, the idea that citizenship is predicated upon a right of access to information, and that the public library service has a particularly significant role in this respect. While it is clear that public libraries, by their very nature, will have a particularly important role to play in promotion of open society, the contributions of other kinds of library service should not be ignored. National, academic and special libraries will all have a role to play, as may commercially funded services (see the remarks by Roberts below). An example of this is the variety of business information services and providers which have emerged as the countries of the former Soviet bloc adapted to more open market conditions; Konn (1998) describes this for the case of Russia.

Although librarians have, for the most part, always held that their profession has a clear ethical stance and commitment, there has not always been clarity as to quite where this may fit within wider ethical contexts. As McGarry (1993) puts it 'it is relatively easy to talk in a general way about the ethical problems that arise in the day-to-day work of the information professional [but] it is a difficult task to

analyse our moral views in a principled or systematic way.’ One of the few examples which have been provided is Doyle’s argument, based on JS Mill’s philosophy, in favour of the free competition of ideas as against library censorship, albeit well-intentioned. Thus we suggest that the need for an explicit consideration of the ethics underlying library and information services as another important tenet for libraries in open societies [*principle 7*].

In one of the more well-structured discussions of this aspect, Alex Byrne (1999) sees the responsibilities of the librarian as discharged ‘within a frame of understandings, an ethic of service and a context of society’. A shared context, Byrne suggests, is provided by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, and specifically its 19th Article, which includes the right ‘to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers’. This means, for Byrne, that libraries ‘must be able to provide all people with access to the information they want, because access to and transmission of information are essential cornerstones of human rights’.

Ideas very similar to these, though expressed in somewhat different terms, have been put forward by Roberts (1992), as a description of a concept which he terms ‘world librarianship’. This focuses strongly on the role of the librarian as the guarantor of wide and open access to information: ‘If there is one very significant task for world librarianship, it is to develop, open up and sustain a tradition of public knowledge and public access as a fundamental right....World librarianship should be the tradition that regards all information and communication activities as a public good, with a private value at many levels .. Where information and communication resources are predominantly private, restricted and elitist, there is every reason to believe and suspect that deprivation and worse for the majority will be a result.’ (Roberts 1992)

A second theme is that of access to information in all formats:

‘I cannot give a certain or total definition, but I have a feeling that librarianship and its philosophies are not so much about libraries and books (important though these are), but by the overall commitment to public information in the public domain’

In addressing the specific ethical aspects of world librarianship, Roberts seeks to avoid equivalencing public access with publicly owned provision:

‘Giving service is a public act, and one should not confuse private ownership with public ownership as the test, nor market economics with public economics. A private commercial library or information service can just as well serve the public interest and the public domain as one paid for wholly by public funds. The key difference is the professional philosophy (or even the moral philosophy) of those who do the providing.’

(Roberts 1992)

Of course, this is not to say that the opposite argument - that a free market philosophy is the only one which will support valid information provision - is valid. Kuzmin (1995), for example, points out that, for all its faults, the Soviet regime did a great deal to promote knowledge to the population (though within strict limits), with libraries as an important instrument. Similarly, Moore (1997), in an analysis of the policy models which underlie planning for ‘information societies’, compares the neo-liberal (market-led) and dirigiste (interventionist) systems. He concludes that the latter, emphasising a holistic approach, while still being compatible with an economic system based on capitalism, is the more appropriate means of introducing an information-based society. This echoes Soros’ concerns about the transactional society noted above, and, more generally, his concerns about reliance on global markets to solve all problems (Soros 1998). Another clear example of this concern in the library context is provided by Ladizesky and Hogg (1998) in their discussion of the changes in the traditional pattern of international exchange of publications between libraries in the former Soviet Bloc and in the West; exchanges rely upon a ‘cultural relationship’, whereas current trends towards regarding all such interactions as basically commercial transactions are weakening the ability of libraries to take part in such programmes.

Charles Leadbeater (1999A), goes beyond the public/private dichotomy, in identifying a distinction between ‘knowledge radicals’ and ‘knowledge conservatives’ - part of the new divisions in society being wrought by innovation and new technology [see also Leadbeater (1999B) for a broader vision of a ‘cosmopolitan and liberal’ knowledge society]:

'Knowledge radicals stand for open societies, prepared to engage in the diversity, immigration and experimentation that goes with radical knowledge creation. Politicians who embrace innovation and change will stand squarely in the Enlightenment tradition which puts reason and ideas, rather than nation and belonging, at the heart of politics.... Knowledge radicals will stress the opportunities inherent in the new economy and they will appeal to the highly mobile and independent knowledge workers who will make up the labour aristocracy of the new economy.'

'Knowledge conservatives take a more cautious, risk-laden view of progress. They tend to value tried and tested old knowledge, prefer a slower rate of innovation and defend established institutions. The knowledge conservatives will come in different stripes: communitarians, new environmental romantics, authoritarian populists, traditional conservatives and defenders of established vested interests. All will argue that knowledge should be controlled, restrained or suppressed for the sake of tradition and community.'

This latter viewpoint has a long, and ignoble history, from the argument of Mr John Imray of Aberdeen against proposals for the setting up of a public library service in Great Britain, that it was 'raising the lower classes too highly by giving them information and that it is better to keep them without it' (PLC 1849), to the more sophisticated Soviet information strategy of 'the greatest possible sum of knowledge - but within certain limits' (Kuzmin 1995).

In general, it seems that those who believe in an open society must be generally on the side of knowledge radicals. This does not mean that librarians who take this view must discard all older knowledge; on the contrary, a significant role may be to argue for the continuing relevance of well-established sources and techniques, against those who argue that only new technologies can provide worthwhile provision. Nor does it mean that libraries should not be concerned with preservation of national and regional heritage and culture; on the contrary, this should be one of the main functions. But, a repudiation of idea of the suppression of knowledge 'for the public good' must lie at the heart of any belief in libraries as agents of open society.

Alex Byrne (1999) makes this point strongly. It may be argued that an assumption of the absolute right of the individual to access whatever information they wish is very much a Western viewpoint, and that, particularly in the Internet age, complete openness to what information is most prevalent may result in the *de facto* imposition of an American culture. Noting these concerns, Byrne makes the case that librarians must take care to 'protect the interests of minorities, so that they do not lose their identities in a global media village'. This may involve active promotion of appropriate materials, and a sensitivity to the reaction of library users to certain kinds of information. However, he argues strongly against any attempt at censorship, or undue restriction of access, even of potentially highly offensive materials, such as those advocating racial hatred. Any such attempt is likely to be futile, in the age of international networks, and is likely to have, or lead to, undesirable consequences, unintended at the outset. Byrne gives a number of library examples of this, as does Oppenheim (1999), who suggests that the Internet environment is such that America is, in effect, exporting the First Amendment to the rest of the world. Oppenheim's recommendations are similar to Byrne's: individuals should be empowered to make their own choices about the material which they access.

One concrete example of this is the use of 'filtering' software to deny access to 'inappropriate' Internet sites; the controversy as to whether libraries should make use of this technology is reviewed by Smith (1999). One particularly sensible approach, in line with the arguments of Byrne and Oppenheim, appears to be that of the New Jersey public library service (New Jersey Library Association 1998, Smith 1999 p 189-190). Its general principle is that all users should be allowed unrestricted access to Internet materials, and hence it opposes the imposition of filtering software. However, it supports the idea that libraries should provide such software, for those users who actively choose to use it, provided that they are provided with advice about the limitations of such software, and about possible unforeseen consequences of its use.

Such concerns are not, of course, limited to the new technologies; librarians, in very different societies, have often had to argue against censorship of 'improper' or 'inappropriate' printed materials. Muswazi (1999), for example, describes the current difficulties facing librarians in the countries of Southern Africa. Lee (1996), in opposing the American campaign for 'Family Friendly Libraries', is one of the few to ground such opposition in an explicit argument for libraries as promoters of an open society. The Internet, however, undoubtedly exacerbates the problem; though it is interesting to note

that the same concerns were expressed about an earlier revolutionary device for the communication of information - the printing press (Bawden and Robinson 2000).

In general, the Internet, and digital networked information generally, serve to point up and bring into a sharp focus several of the points discussed above. The need for open and objective criticism of the value of information resources is made apparent by the proliferation of resources, many of questionable value, which are now readily available, and is met by the sets of detailed 'quality criteria', reached by consensus and widely publicised, used by subject gateways (Robinson and Bawden 1999, Hofman and Worsfold 1997). This same factor makes the need for critical thinking, now cast in the form of digital literacy, of immediate importance (Bawden 2000, Gilster 1997).

The Internet is being seen in many quarters as a tool for providing better access to information of immediate relevance to open society; an example from Great Britain is the 'citizenship in a modern state' area of funding within the 'New Opportunities Fund', which funds Internet access to 'information that helps people to access services, including information rights and obligations and how to be effective in dealing with different organisations' (details are available from <http://www.nof-digitise.org>). The increasing significance of digitised information, and the skills of digital literacy needed to deal effectively with it, are of vital importance for librarians involved in the promotion of open societies. One response to this has been the extension of a two-week course on 'Libraries and the Internet', sponsored by the Soros Library Programme, to deal with the wider concept of 'Digital Literacy for Open Societies' (Robinson, Kupryte, Burnett and Bawden 2000).

Finally, of course, it is necessary to retain a sense of proportion. While the library profession may consider that its contribution to open society to be self-evident, others may not agree. Roberts (1992) speaks of '... the contribution of world librarianship to individual and social wellbeing, with a status not less than education, economy, livelihood and health. The contribution to political life and cultural life that information can make is self-evident, and there must therefore be full public means of provision'. But this is an over-optimistic assessment. For one thing, there are other needs and rights which may seem of more immediate importance than access to information: as Yilmaz (1999) puts it 'the phrase "right to information" for a person who is hungry, who does not have enough money to live, who is not educated, and who does not have freedom, does not have any meaning'. The commendable proposition that access to information may be a powerful aid in overcoming all these difficulties is not an obvious one.

Furthermore, while we may wish to agree with Roberts that the importance of 'information' may be accepted as self-evident - do we not, after all, live in an 'information society' during an 'information age' and embracing an 'information economy' - the same is certainly not true of libraries. The emphasis in many quarters on provision of Internet access as a complete solution to the problem of information access is the most obvious example. Libraries are effective promoters of open society, but if that role is not recognised, then both libraries and society will be losers.

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