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Information and knowledge for open societies; seven principles for libraries and librarians

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This presentation examines the role of libraries and information services, in promoting the ideas of ‘open society’ espoused by the philosopher Karl Popper and the philanthropist George Soros. The main part of the presentation examines the role played by provision of knowledge and information, specifically but not exclusively by libraries, in the development of this form of society. The importance of new technology, particularly the Internet, and of critical thinking and of information literacy and digital literacy, as complements to technical advances are discussed.

Conclusions are drawn for the role of libraries and librarians, with seven general principles suggested:

- the importance of provision of access to a wide variety of sources without ‘negative’ restriction or censorship
- the need for 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 information and communication technologies, and of the Internet in particular
- the importance of the promotion of critical thinking and digital literacy, both among the library profession and among our patrons
- a need for a more explicit consideration of the ethical values of libraries and librarians than has been the case

A longer version of this presentation is to be published in *Aslib Proceedings* during 2001, with the title *Libraries and open society; Popper, Soros and digital information*

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. 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 (Popper 1987, Notturmo 2000). For

an overview of the current status of the open society concept, see Jarvie and Pralong (1999).

This concept was extended and somewhat amended by the financier and philanthropist George Soros (1998, 2000). 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. 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). For Soros, too, knowledge and information are important considerations for an open 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.

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 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.; but such choices must be made openly and transparently. 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. 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*].

A refusal to restrict access to sources amounts to support for a free flow 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, of the kind more commonly assumed by libraries and information centres in the private sector. An interesting example is an Estonian Parliamentary decree that 'information must be provided actively and systematically and, as a whole, be easy to comprehend' (Virkus 2000).

Another consideration is George Soros' concept of 'reflexivity'. Soros argues that statements whose truth value is indeterminate 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. 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*].

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*].

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-facted, but should take the form of positive encouragement and empowerment of users, rather than negative restriction and censorship. [Choldin (1977) gives the cautionary example of Tsarist Russia, when censorship, initially introduced as ‘guardianship’ function, aimed at providing a guide to good books, quickly attained a ‘police’ function.] One example of the positive approach 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 2001, Snaveley 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’.

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 (McGarry 1993). So, an explicit consideration of the ethics underlying library and information services as another important tenet for libraries in open societies [*principle 7*]. Examples are given by Byrne (1999), Choldin (1996), and Roberts (1992). While this generally leads to arguments against state control of information resources, it 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; see, for example, Kuzmin (1995), Moore (1997), and Ladizesky and Hogg (1998). Another interesting viewpoint is that of Charles Leadbeater (1999A, 1999B), who goes beyond the public/private dichotomy, in identifying a distinction between 'knowledge radicals' and 'knowledge conservatives'.

Such concerns are often voiced for new technologies, particularly the Internet (see, for example, Oppenheim 1999, Smith 1999), but are not limited to them; librarians, in very different societies, have often had to argue against censorship of 'improper' or 'inappropriate' printed materials; see, for example, Jones (1999), Muswazi (1999), and Lee (1996). 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). 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 often seen as a tool for providing better access to information of immediate relevance to open society. 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 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. 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'.

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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