

process of myth-making in which a "cluster of social, cultural, and political values, beliefs, images and concepts" have been drawn together around a particular concept of the role of technology and, in particular, of information technology, consonant with an increasingly technocratic and undemocratic agenda very much at odds with "traditional conception of the library and librarianship." He is especially successful in showing how the means and methods of self-definition, especially in the drive to create a "professional" identity, have led to very fundamental shifts in orientation which belie a unilinear and unidirectional approach to library history.

Tracing the process of displacement of the myth of the "library as place" by the ideal of the dematerialized "virtual library" currently held to be the telos of library development, Birdsall, along the way, draws out the implications of successive myth-elaboration and myth-replacement on every aspect of librarianship from organization and management, to cataloging and reference and on the changing image of the librarian in our own literature and in the social imagination.

Birdsall's critical take on the whole "cult of information" (to use a phrase of Theodore Rozsak's) is a refreshing alternative to the vast literature in our field (very ably explicated as well as critiqued by Birdsall) in which a reified concept of "information" and an entirely formal concept of "communication" have replaced "knowledge" as the central value and organizing principle of our endeavors. Birdsall makes a real contribution to deconstructing the rhetoric of the "information society" which has become the common currency of our professional discourse, going on to show how it narrow and distorts our sense of feasible and desirable options for library development.

While I find Birdsall's attraction to the notion of a "therapeutic" model for librarianship problematic, I feel his discussion of this alternative mode of conceptualizing the role of the librarian and the library at least opens up the discussion of humanistic alternatives to the market-driven models currently in vogue. In summing up the book in his last chapter, he wisely provides, not a blueprint for a new librarianship (therapeutic or otherwise) but a useful list of propositions, flowing from his analysis, meant to awaken librarians to the need to "critically assess the role of libraries and librarianship in a time of social change and, in particular, to explore and debate more fully the implications of the myth of the electronic library." Readers of Birdsall's provocative book will find much to fuel such a necessary and urgent debate.

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