

# A Political Economy of Librarianship?

by William F. Birdsall

Librarians are striving to insure that libraries are part of emerging national and global information infrastructures. The creation of these infrastructures is typically presented as being the result of developments in information technology, in particular, the convergence of computing and telecommunications. Such a view encourages librarians to be lulled into thinking the challenge facing them is solely technical. This is not the case. The potential transformation of libraries due to developments in information technology cannot be divorced from political and economic forces driving technological change. Consequently, this paper argues that there is a need for a political economy of librarianship.

The phrase “political economy” conjures up for many images of quaint looking eighteenth and nineteenth century economists. And rightly so. All the great eighteenth and nineteenth century founders of modern economics – Adam Smith, Thomas Malthus, David Ricardo, John Stuart Mill, Karl Marx – were political economists because they recognized the intimate connection between economics and politics, between economy and state. The focus of the classical economics of the eighteenth century was on the nature and generation of the wealth of nations, as exemplified by its most famous exponent, Adam Smith. As the economic historian Robert Heilbroner observes, “the attribute of early capitalism most attractive to [Adam] Smith was political, not economic.” (Heilbroner 1996, 56) Early political economists were attempting to explain not only the new phenomenon of the capital market but also its relationship to the state and the welfare of its citizens.

There have been various schools of political economy including the classical or liberal, the Marxist and, more recently, the institutional (Babe 1995, 72-75). In the latter case, political economists are attempting to move away from the ideological connotations surrounding the liberal and Marxist traditions. Instead, they focus more on the concrete world of politicians and political processes, policy players, and how they relate to economic forces. Whatever the focus or method, “the immediate central political issue in

capitalism, the issue that takes on an often obsessive prominence in every capitalist nation is the relationship between business and government, or from a somewhat more distant perspective, between the economy and the state." (Heibroner 1992, 50)

Early political economy was the foundation of the modern social sciences; indeed, by the twentieth century economics and political science became professional disciplines that staked out separate spheres of social life for investigation. However, more recently there is the recognition that the separation of economics and politics as distinct disciplines is an artificial one. As Todd Buchholz, student of economic theory and former member of the White House Economic Policy Council, observes: "The strongest link between economics and the real world has always been politics." (Buchholz 1989, 2). Political economy is a thriving field of scholarly pursuit as perusal of the titles on the in-print lists of respectable university presses attest. Indeed, regarding the name "political economy," the *Oxford Dictionary of Economics* asserts: "It can be argued that it [political economy] is actually a better name for the subject [economics], as it draws attention to the political motivation of economic policies: policy makers and lobbyists are often more concerned with the income distribution than with the efficiency effects of policies." (Black 1997, 357)

How does a political economist differ from the more widely recognized commonplace economist? University of Ottawa professor in communications studies Robert Babe asserts that political economists "place the question of power front and center." (1995, 63) They recognize that the economic system does not derive from some divine or natural law, but is a human creation that cannot be divorced from considerations of power relations in society. Indeed, according to Babe, political economy "seeks to reintegrate, for purposes of comprehension and analysis, the polity and economy." Thus, political economists "address the impact of laws, regulation, political influence, and governmental processes on economic activity, and conversely the manner and degree whereby economic activity and financial matters impinge upon legislation and legislative processes." Political economy is, then, "the study of the economy as a system of power." (1995, 71) Business leaders and policy pundits advocate the differentiation of the economy and the state, but political economy reveals that economics and politics are entwined by power relationships. As the earlier quote from *Oxford Dictionary of Economics* noted, the primary concern of policy makers and those who attempt to influence them is most often their own interests, not the public good, a particularly noteworthy point when we look

shortly at the current political realm of the library.

No profession concerned with the administration of a public institution, such as the library, can ignore the need to pursue serious research into the politico-economic sphere of public policy. Understanding the enduring link between economics and politics is crucial to understanding the current political realm of librarianship. Achieving this understanding is the reason for the need to develop a political economy of librarianship. Currently, the primary attention librarians give to politics and economics is political advocacy for the purpose of generating enhanced funding of libraries. Such advocacy is admittedly very important and librarians have become increasingly sophisticated at doing it. However, I assert that librarians need to devote more effort researching the political and economic dynamics that define the past and current environment of libraries. Libraries are the creation and instrument of public policy derived from political processes. Understanding these processes includes appreciating the connection between the polity and the economy. This connection between the polity and economy defines the political realm of the library and the basis for this paper's claim that there is a need to develop a political economy of librarianship.

It is especially important at this time that librarians concern themselves with the power relationships embodied in the economy and polity because so much government information public policy is currently under the spell of an ideology of information technology. (Birdsall 1996) This is an ideology that promotes economic ends by diminishing the political will and power of the general citizen. It promotes consumer sovereignty over citizen sovereignty. Accordingly, it denigrates the value of public institutions such as the library and advocates the moving of the services they provide out of the category of public goods and into that of commodities to be traded in the marketplace.

The ideology of information technology consists of the following chain of premises:

- Information technology is the sole cause of the inevitable economic, social, and cultural change from an industrial society to an information society.
- In the knowledge-based economy only the marketplace should determine how information, its primary raw material, is generated, priced, and distributed.

- The market is at its most efficient when government does not intervene, especially in the global economy.
- Government's primary role is to promote a competitive market through deregulation, privatization and the development of e-commerce.
- The knowledge-based economy requires a new kind of worker, a knowledge worker who is prepared to go anywhere in the world to sell her or his skills.
- The knowledge worker is expected to have no loyalties to the local community and its public institutions.
- The knowledge-based economy also requires a new kind of citizen, the citizen as consumer. The primary responsibility of a good citizen is to be a good consumer at the information highway mall.

The ideology of information technology promotes a fatalism that encourages political passivity by claiming that our fates are determined by inevitable technological change, the "natural" laws of the free market, and the uncontrollable gale forces of global creative destruction.

Heilbroner observes that "ideologies are systems of thought and belief by which dominant classes explain *to themselves* [his emphasis] how their social system operates and what principles it exemplifies." (1985, 107) The ideology of information technology is consistently expounded in the business media and by industry-funded think tanks, government departments, politicians, popular futurists, and corporate leaders. Business and political elites constantly promulgate this ideology to justify and explain to themselves – and to convince others – that this is the way the world is, the way it has to be. It is, in short, a rhetorical device used for persuasive, ideological reasons. As Simon Fraser University Professor of Communications, William Leiss, points out, this persuasive intent leads to a self-fulfilling circularity. If we can be persuaded that the information society, for example, is inevitable and alter our behavior and policy accordingly, we will find the "inevitability" of the initial prediction achieved. He describes this process as follows:

1. Analysis develops a conceptual model, namely, the concept of the "information society" whose objective is to influence
2. policy initiatives that will create favorable conditions for shaping a
3. social response that over time results in changed social behavior and new
4. behavior patterns that resemble those originally predicted as desirable in the
5. analysis itself, thus confirming the model's predictions about
6. what was "inevitable." (Liess 1989, 284)

Ideology, in time, becomes reality.

This is the political realm that threatens the library. Libraries are marginalized as institutions serving the public. Instead, the ideology postulates that the private sector can most efficiently meet consumer needs by delivering information directly to consumers through an electronic market on the privately constructed and operated information highway. Industry Canada is given the mandate by government to promote the private sector construction of the information highway while it focuses on a "Connecting Canadians" access policy aimed at delivering Canadians to the Internet mall. As for information generated by the government itself, adherents of the ideology believe it should be sold directly to the consumer rather than distributed free through the library. The commodification of information should be facilitated by government copyright policies that favor creators over users and privacy legislation aimed at promoting e-commerce rather than wider social needs. Furthermore, the distribution of information in the market should be promoted by privatizing and deregulating public services, such as libraries, broadcasting, and telecommunications that were formerly required to meet universal access public policy requirements.

Government's reliance on the private sector to build the information highway has had a direct and logical consequence for the funding of public institutions. The building of the infrastructure and the development of services do require a massive infusion of capital. Hence, the almost obsessive attention given in the popular media about the mergers and acquisitions of information technology companies, the issuing of IPOs, the rise and fall of the Nasdaq Stock Market, the emergence of e-commerce, and the phenomenon of the over-night creation of twenty-something millionaires. Of more direct consequence to libraries is the logical result that corporations in the information and telecommunications sector, eager to absorb all available capital, strive to diminish funds flowing to government by urging that debt reduction be given the highest government priority, that telecommunications firms and their employees be given tax breaks, and that public funding give highest priority to technical and scientific training.

Scholars in other disciplines outside of librarianship have challenged the validity of the premises of the ideology of information technology. Of particular relevance to librarianship is the rich body of Canadian research in the political economy of communications. Inspired by the work of Dallas Smythe, if not actually trained by him at the University of Regina and Simon Fraser University, a distinguished line of scholars in Canada have

pursued a political economy research agenda in communication studies. (Mosco 1996, 82-97) Among their works librarians should consult Vincent Mosco's *The Pay-per Society* (1989) and *The Political Economy of Communication* (1996). There is Robert E. Babe's *Telecommunications in Canada* (1990) and *Communication and the Transformation of Economics* (1995). Dwayne Winseck's *Reconvergence: A Political Economy of Telecommunications in Canada* (1998) extends the work of these earlier studies.

Activists in librarianship, working through such bodies as the Canadian Library Association Committee on Information Policy, have also challenged the premises of the ideology of information technology (Campbell 1998). Nonetheless, practicing librarians, struggling to formulate effective political strategies to insure citizens' access to knowledge through libraries lack a body of research that could provide them with a conceptual framework within which to develop effective advocacy strategies. There has been little sustained critical inquiry within librarianship of the premises upon which much government economic policy is founded. What would be the characteristics of a political economy of librarianship?

In his *The Political Economy of Communication* (1996) Vincent Mosco discusses four characteristics of political economy that provide a framework for how a political economy of librarianship could be formulated. (Mosco, 27-38) For Mosco, the first characteristic of political economy is a focus on social change and historical transformation. Librarians are not, of course, unaware that these are times of social change. However, they avoid critical analysis of this change: rather, they have uncritically adopted the popular simplification of a shift to an information society. The study of library history has become an arcane specialization within librarianship. Its place within the curriculum of schools of library and information studies has been greatly diminished with the result that new practitioners have little understanding of the political and economic environment confronting libraries. (This lack is perhaps being offset to some extent by the greater attention some schools are now giving to information public policy.)

Following on the focus on social change, political economy as a discipline is concerned with the social totality. While it is primarily concerned with the economic and political aspects of life, it encompasses the full range of social and cultural life. Again, librarians have increasingly narrowed their perspective, concentrating on how librarians as "information managers" can contribute to the electronic transmission of information to the customer rather than on the role of librarianship in promoting access to knowledge in

all its forms in the educational, cultural, social, political, and economic life of the citizen.

A third characteristic of political economy is its grounding in moral philosophy, that is, a concern for social values and practices. Librarianship, with its commitment to universal access to knowledge is certainly not devoid of moral values. Librarians have tended to want to project librarianship as an objective profession transcending any particular political or moral imperatives. Their ideal is to retreat to a value free information science. Such a stance is untenable at a time when the existence of libraries is threatened by a pervasive ideology that maintains that the generation, distribution and provision of access to knowledge should be provided through an economic market sustained on an information highway built and controlled by the private sector.

The fourth characteristic of political economy identified by Mosco is praxis, the real world of human activity. Political economy strives to relate theory and practice and in that respect it is closely related to such disciplines as communication, policy and cultural studies. The focus on praxis leads to the question: who will create a political economy of librarianship? There has always been a gap between the practitioner in the field and the academic in the professional school. Developing a political economy of librarianship can provide a common ground bringing practitioner and researcher together. Communication scholar Herbert Schiller's delineation of the characteristics of a political economy of culture identifies lines of inquiry that can be jointly pursued by the practitioner and academic in librarianship: "It requires, among other qualities, the scrutiny of decision-making processes, the identification of the participants as far as it is possible to do so, the weighting of their relative influences, and the factoring of fiscal, administrative, and technical acts of commission and omission." (Schiller, 83) Following along Schiller's suggestive points, a political economy of librarianship could examine, for example, the validity of the premises of the ideology of information technology, how they have become incorporated into public policy, and whose ends are being met.

Telecommunications public policy issues are increasingly among those issues daily confronting librarians. All the issues that have been central concerns of modern librarianship are challenged by those advancing the development of a global, information technology-based economy. Concepts about which there was once general agreement, such as intellectual property rights, intellectual freedom, and universal access are open to

debate and redefinition in the world of the Internet. (Adams and Birdsall 1999) The relevance of public institutions such as the library is challenged by those advocating the allocation of services in accordance with demand generated by those who can pay. The confluence of research and practice in a political economy of librarianship can strengthen the library profession for the critical advocacy and political role it must play in creating a new telecommunications environment that insures citizen access to knowledge.

This paper argues that a political economy of librarianship is required, especially at this time when a pervasive ideology of information technology seeks to replace the role of libraries with market mechanisms in the provision of information and knowledge. Furthermore, it is my position that practitioners in the field should combine their frontline experience with the theoretical perspectives of academics to formulate jointly a political economy of librarianship. Finally, I encourage librarians to draw on the political economy tradition of the cognate discipline of communications studies, which can provide conceptual frameworks and specific lines of inquiry.

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## Intellectual Property: A Historical Perspective on the Commodification of Information

by Darcy Sharman

The concept of intellectual property informs many aspects of the way we interact with information. We believe in the existence of the "original author," and we legislate to that author the right to own and profit from his or her ideas. We also agree that the disseminators of these ideas – publishers, distributors, and online service providers – can "buy up" information and benefit financially from allowing the public to access it. As our economy becomes more and more information based, possession and control of this type of intangible "property" becomes increasingly imperative to economic survival.

Implicit in this scenario is a process wherein information becomes commodified. Bringing information into the forefront of a market system changes it from a shared resource to a purchased good, and transforms its access from a right into a privilege. Recent advances in technology bring their own complications into the picture, as in the modern context what the information consumer is purchasing is often not the information itself, but the right to view it, temporarily, on the seller's terms.

Critics of the present situation often state that technology has spurred the commoditizing process, and that the principles of information ownership are created and perpetuated by those who create technological trends. But is the commodification of information really such a new process? Is technology really its source? Or does the current situation have deeper social and political roots? This paper will examine the idea of information as a commodity from a historical perspective. It will propose that the role of technological innovations in supporting commodification is reflective of underlying cultural values that enshrine market processes, profit orientation, and disposability, rather than an outside force that the culture reacts against. The role of libraries as a counteracting force, democratizing information access, will also be discussed.