

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.

History

Although we often think of information commodification as a new process, the history of intellectual property goes back into some of the farthest reaches of our recorded history. In fact, according to Mulgan, "the book was one of the very first commodities." (119) Both he and Kleinbart look to Greece in the 5th century B.C.E., and its active book trade, for the first examples of buying and selling information. The rise of this intellectual market coincided with a renewed acknowledgement within the culture of the existence of the individual creative self, as well as with the development of urban societies and commerce (Bettig 134). Previously, it had been not originality, but craftsmanship within established forms, that had been valued. Oral cultures like that of the earlier Greek societies had viewed creative works as collectively produced, and as entities to be imitated and built upon by others (Bettig 134, Kamber 428-29).

In Europe, the scribal culture of copying and the oral nature of much of Medieval communications worked against the concept of intellectual property rights (Bettig 136), but this situation changed with the invention of the printing press and the increasing literacy rates among the general populace. Mulgan discusses the control of early printing monopolies by royal "privileges" and dates the first example of copyright to historian Antonio Sabellico in 1486. Both he (121) and Bettig (138) note that established authorities understood the threat that mass printing and distribution posed to their control of information dissemination, and asserted their control over the presses to reestablish and reinforce their control over their subjects. Authors themselves were arguing for their own rights of intellectual control as early as Milton, who wrote in his *Aeropagitica* that "every author should have the property of his work." (Mulgan 121)

Kleinbart devotes the first section of his paper, "The intersection of information, economics and universality in the 1990s" (7-13), to tracing how the economic structures of Western history became a basis for our overall culture; the initial local, decentralized Greek structures, he says, lasted through to the Medieval period, when the Crusades expanded the reach of economic activity across national borders. Economic theories and values slowly started to become universal, part of the "natural world order," underpinning the eighteenth-century intellectual property/copyright debates and the later rise of the Industrial Revolution. The literature on the Enlightenment period (Kamber, Swartz, Woodmansee) discusses how copyright and intellectual property legislation arose in conjunction with the shift towards a recognition of individual authorial genius, and an acknowledge-

ment of writing as a professional, rather than a purely artistic, occupation. Wordsworth figures prominently in these sources, as he was highly active in the campaign to extend copyright and give authors the right of ownership and control over their works — these rights including the right to profit. In an interesting parallel to modern concerns, Swartz states that the people of that time were worried about what they saw as a "simultaneous [process] of commercialization and commodification of culture" (501), which may explain the ambivalence, demonstrated in even its staunchest supporters, towards the mercantilization of original authorship. There was a sharp line drawn between the original genius or true artisan, disinterested in material fortune, and the crass commercialist looking to make a quick dollar (Swartz 486). Even as they fought for the economic control of their work, authors in the Enlightenment period still wanted to distance themselves from the image of the tradesperson or the mercantile. They wanted to be seen as artists, or cultural treasures, and above worldly concerns. Paradoxically, however, they still wanted to gain monetarily from their art. Justification for the "disinterested genius" still expecting to profit from his or her writings was provided by shifting the focus to the author's need to provide for their families, whose estates should not be allowed to suffer (Swartz 507).

It is interesting to see similar concerns color the debate on modern library services. Some feel these services are basic and necessary, and should be above concerns of cost, profit, and the "market." According to others, however, libraries should be financially self-sustaining, and prove their worth to their users. Libraries adopt private sector ideas of customer orientation and fee-for-service, but still think of themselves as a public good that should be supported appropriately. Whether library services are sacrosanct or expendable, a necessary public good or an unnecessary service, seems undecided, even among professionals.

Perhaps it is worth noting here, too, that even though some writers believe that libraries have always been "genuinely idealistic institutions" (Roszac 172), during the Enlightenment library users were deliberately restricted by social class and ability to pay. Part of the motive was profit-oriented, as seen in the example of Xavier Mayer von Schauensee and other eighteenth century Lucerne librarians "intrigued by the commercial possibilities of renting out books" (Kamber 209). These men charged high subscription fees, which would necessarily restrict their audience to those who could afford the charge (207-8). But another aspect of the pricing scheme shows concern with maintenance and control of social conditions; as Kamber states: "[o]n the one hand, the philosphes proclaimed the elimination of

ignorance and superstition among the people; but, on the other hand, they feared that educated commoners would become dissatisfied with their social and economic status" (209), a situation which could be a first step toward revolt or revolution. A convenient side effect of pricing information out of the lower classes' reach generally, then, is that of social control – another theme that could be conceivably carried over into the present day (although, the current protected interests would likely be that of government and industry).

Schiller discusses the eighteenth century events from a Marxist socialist perspective, linking them to the broader history of capitalism. He notes that Karl Marx and the agents of the Russian Revolution stated outright that economic concerns structure the way a culture operates, and posited them as a "universal, unifying force in the world" (138). The post-War period has only continued this trend, as we see in events like the Gulf War, which could be said to have been motivated solely by global economic concerns. Schiller argues that changes in the nature of information and information access play a significant role in enabling the economic viewpoint (138).

Technology, Culture and Shifts in Concept

Berrid Frohmann and Dan Schiller are among the most political critics of the contemporary arena, connecting the transformation of information into a commodity with overarching social and economic structures; rather than taking the consumer model for granted, they examine and critique it from a socialist perspective. Schiller, especially, comments on how the commodification of information adds to the larger commodification processes at work in our society, with an interesting examination of the movement in biology and biotechnology towards information communication models (101-103). Working from a Marxist viewpoint, he shows how capitalism and the capitalist process are connected with, and reinforced by, an acceptance of information as a commodity. Frohmann frames his discussion in the context of Library and Information Studies, as he writes of the implications of both the focus on the cognitive viewpoint and the information commodification process for the field. Both consumerism and the shift in LIS to a discourse of images and subjectivity, he says, are disempowering to information users, as advertisers and the market exploit and manipulate images to create identity and manufacture information need (382-384). Further commentary in a Marxist vein is provided by Davis and Stack, who foresee access to information by the public decreasing as information and database access is quantified, privatized, and sold (10-11). Theodore Roszak looks at twentieth century events in detail, from the negative views of information workers

that were prevalent mid-century to our current glorification of information and information access. His discussions raise issues around power and control over the dissemination of information and the industrial creation of an information market (172-5; 3-14).

Other writers approach the topic from different perspectives. Allen writes from the economist's viewpoint, introducing complex mathematical formulae in an attempt to calculate the value of information. She also discusses several of the problems involved in quantifying information, and introduces the idea that commoditized information can "decay rapidly" (271) and be considered disposable. Looking at the writings of Adam Smith, whose ideas influenced United States policies in the 1980s, Braverman makes a case for libraries falling under Smith's category of "public goods," i.e., institutions which are worthy of state support because they are beneficial to society as a whole (398); she warns that business models of efficiency and cost-effectiveness segment the library "market" and, like the Enlightenment librarians described earlier, deny information to those who cannot pay (401).

Asheim, Kleinbart and Mulgan all comment on the commodification of information in the context of recent technological developments. Issues around the difficulty of exclusive ownership and control due to advances in automation and its reliance on copying are discussed, and they speak of commodification as a reactive process to technology and telecommunications (Asheim 191; Mulgan 123; Kleinbart 139). Finally, as an interesting change from the rest of the literature, Martell describes his personal thoughts on the subject over the past two decades. While he originally felt that the commodification of information would lead to society placing a higher value on information services ("Finance, business, transportation and government dwell on what is happening with commodities. As part of this world, librarians will be better off."), he has since been disillusioned with the process, finding it focuses more on economic interests and machines than on human beings (85). All these sources discuss the fact that the movement away from pricing the containers of information to pricing the information itself – a process which began in the Enlightenment – has been reinforced by today's technology.

As noted previously, many writers – Asheim, Kleinbart, Mulgan, even, to an extent, Schiller – see the present trend toward commodification as a reaction to the capabilities inherent in computerized information processing and transfer. This raises the question: if historical shifts to commodification

of information were influenced by societal forces, could not the present situation also be culturally based? Did this technology really create commoditized information out of a vacuum, or is it instead a product of human invention, and therefore an outgrowth of the cultural context in which it was created? It is indisputable that we are living in a world where the market is king, and that information is being redefined and sold within that market discourse. My inclination, then, is to see the commodification of information as a reflection of what some of the more socialist writers examined here might call the advanced capitalist underpinnings of our culture – a symptom of our overall condition, rather than a separate condition itself.

All this being said, what are the problems with treating information as a commodity in a technological context? One of the most obvious has been touched on earlier: the fact that allowing the marketplace to determine the price of information and its access will ultimately mean that those without material resources – the marginalized, the uneducated, and those who are simply uncomfortable with electronic mediums – will find it difficult or impossible to acquire it. Lack of ready access will become even more of a problem in the event that the much-trumpeted “Information Age” actually arrives. Markets are built around pricing, and as Mulgan points out, “[u]nless information can be kept scarce it cannot command a price. Without a price, private capital has no incentive to provide it. If production industries are unable to control the commodity form of what they produce the end result will be massive underproduction” (135). If our economy, our society, and our daily lives are to be built around interactions with information, then access to information becomes crucial. The possibility of profit motives alone determining the level of our access to information services is truly disturbing, especially if one considers the impact it could have on the ability of already cash-strapped libraries to maintain and develop their collections and services.

Another factor is consumerism and its reliance on obsolescence, or disposability. Along with creating artificial scarcity, one method of creating product demand is to convince potential buyers that what they already own is not good enough, and should be supplanted or replaced. As Frohmann says: “[t]he ideal consumer good has least endurance, because it permits the translation of sustained desire into repeated consumption” (383). Further imposing this quality on a product that is already described as being one that “decays rapidly” (Allen 271), and has “something less than the shelf life of a styrofoam cup” (Lazer 54) may be counterproductive. If knowledge and wisdom (both personal and collective) are built upon information that

has not only been accumulated over time but also digested, lived with, and worked upon, what does our obsession with acquiring the new at the expense of devaluing the old mean for our potential for learning and experience? And if information is parceled out in expensive fragments, rather than being freely available as an holistic corpus, what will be the impact of the potential knowledge gaps on our ability to create wisdom within an historical context?

The Role of Libraries

If the process of information commodification is indeed as problematic as it seems to be, what role can libraries play in insuring that the process is counteracted, or at least slowed? Although we have seen that libraries have not always historically been free from concerns of profit and social control, it is possible that in some respects modern libraries, by their very existence, are agents of protest against the capital interests of the “information marketplace.” If profit depends on scarcity, then the open nature of the library works to devalue sold information; even if a library charges subscription fees, as many currently do, that fee is substantially lower than the price of obtaining information through the private sector. The public offering of database searches and other online services undercuts attempts by the market to create scarcity and concentrate ownership, as well as countering efforts by technological industries to commodify information access and restrict its flow to those who can afford to pay for the latest connectivity, CD-ROMs and software. At its most extreme, one can imagine a scenario of libraries as radical socialist forces facing off against capitalist information monopolies. The image is not entirely realistic, but one cannot deny that libraries can take a stand against informational and cultural commodification merely by strengthening their commitment to holistic, free or low-cost service.

In the context of information obsolescence and disposability, libraries can also function to preserve our cultural heritage by collecting and maintaining historical materials. I use the word “historical” here in its broadest sense, as advances in technology have made accessing records stored in obsolete formats next to impossible. Industry profit motives mean that older equipment is not maintained or supported; it is also expensive (in equipment and in labour) to convert old records to new formats. While libraries already function as our cultural memories to a certain degree, in the future this “memory” may be even more important, as older information is discarded by a market fascinated by the new and contemptuous of the “outdated.”

Conclusion

The concept of intellectual property is not new. In truth, the commodification of information began as far back as the 5th century B.C.E.; it continued with the invention of the printing press, the decline of feudalism and the move towards capitalist social structures; and it was codified with copyright legislation in the Enlightenment and beyond. Neither is the commodification of information a process discrete from broader political contexts. Instead, we have transferred cultural values of free-market processes and disposability onto the ways we deal with information. Technology has hastened the process, but technology is in itself only a reflection of our broader social mores.

Libraries in general, and public libraries in particular, have not been immune to these trends. Debates about what constitutes "core services" rage on in many institutions, as libraries expand their reach into the corporate marketplace and begin to offer fee-based information services. At the same time, public demand and changing information platforms mean that Internet access and the provision of online databases occupy larger percentages of total library resources. Libraries, too, are increasingly in danger of becoming leasers of information access, relinquishing control and ownership to secondary vendors who may not reliably preserve – or even provide – historical data.

Yet it is generally accepted that intellectual freedom, which asserts rights of access to all regardless of ability to pay, is the modern library's mandate. In this regard, libraries play an almost subversive role in the information "marketplace," giving away for free what others would prefer to have the exclusive privilege to sell. If they so choose, libraries can act against the forces that would work to further commoditize information and to bestow upon it the characteristics of any market good. In accepting and fulfilling this role, libraries can become agents of true democracy, empowering citizens with the knowledge they need to avoid being manipulated for the interests of others more powerful than themselves.

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