Samuel E. Trosow

The Commodification of Information and the Public Good

New Challenges for a Progressive Librarianship

Concern about the commodification of information is not new in the field of librarianship. Nor are concerns about the erosion of the public sphere and the corresponding pressures to cut costs and adopt managerial approaches borrowed from the private sector. These problems have all been recognized for several decades and each has been discussed in the literature of library and information studies (Schiller & Schiller, 1988; M. Harris, 1986; R. Harris, 1992, Buschman, 2003; Trosow and Nilsen, 2006; Buschman, 2006).

Yet as market forces continue to impose themselves in our day-to-day practices and in the way librarians think of themselves, their services, and their relationships to the communities they serve; there is growing danger of resignation and adaptation to these changes (see Coffman, 1998). I sense a weariness in the will to question the results of managerial and market-oriented imperatives, which increasingly arise within the public institution itself.

In this essay[1] I will argue that the political economy of information and the notion of the public sphere are two central concepts that need to be linked together and given considerably more emphasis in the field of librarianship. Based on these concepts, we can develop information policies in a holistic and critical manner (Trosow, 2010) that allow us to approach a "progressive librarianship," one that protects the public sphere, resists marketization, defends the notion of information as a public good, and which builds general support for public information services.

In presenting a theoretical framework which can support the development and growth of a critical approach to information services, or more directly: a

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framework for progressive librarianship, I hope to actively push back against and resist developments that threaten the normative assumptions and goals of our field. Central to this approach are the two interrelated concepts of political economy of librarianship and the preservation and development of the public sphere.

The political economy of librarianship

In one of the few articles directly addressing the political economy of librarianship, William Birdsall (2000) begins with the argument that:

> 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.

Ruth Rikowski (2001-2002) adopts a similar approach, stressing the incursion of the corporate model into library practices in the U.K. I would also adopt this approach and link it to the concept of the public sphere and the need for an overall holistic and critical approach to information policy. Birdsall's article provides a good introduction to the history and background of "political economy." He says:

> 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. ... [these] 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.

Despite the significant differences between various schools of political economy, they all shared in recognizing the linkage between the economy and the polity. But by the end of the 19th century, economics and political science started to become separate fields. These separate disciplines began to take on their own identities, their own areas of research and their own separate approaches. The direction taken by mainstream economics was decidedly market-oriented and based largely on notions of efficiency. This efficiency model is based on a number of assumptions about how markets operate and how an efficient market is the ideal allocative mechanism to maximize social welfare. These assumptions include perfect competition without barriers to entry, perfect information, stable consumer preferences and the absence of externalities. But the overriding assumption is that rational and self-interested actors will engage in utility-maximizing transactions that will optimize their own welfare. The operation of this efficient market depends on the construction of supply and demand curves where buyers and sellers state their preferences of how many units of goods they will buy and sell at various prices. The classic upwardly sloping supply curve assumes that as prices increase, producers will increase supplies. In contrast the downwardly sloping demand curve assumes that as prices fall, the quantity of goods purchased by consumers will increase. While partial market failures (imperfect competition, lack of information or information imbalances, and externalities) can all be accommodated within the price system, the "public goods" problem is considered a total market failure which cannot be reconciled with the price system. The difference between *public goods* and *private goods* as the terms are used by economists is a crucial distinction that warrants further elaboration (see DeLong and Froomkin, 2000; Murray and Trosow, 2013, pp. 11-15).

Public goods are non-rival in their consumption and do not have an effective exclusion mechanism. Non-rival consumption means that the enjoyment of the good can be shared without depletion. Goods that exhibit rivalry in consumption are depleted upon use.

> Physical consumer goods that populate store shelves are rival in consumption. When a widget is purchased it is no longer on the shelf for the next shopper. Depletable energy resources are another classic example of rivalry in consumption When we say that public goods are non-rival in consumption, we mean that the consumption of the good by one person does not reduce the amount of the good available for consumption by others. If you walk down a street illuminated by a street light, the light is not depleted because you enjoyed its benefit. (Murray and Trosow, 2013, pp. 11)

Where goods lack an effective exclusion mechanism, the user can enjoy the benefit of the good without paying for it. Examples of exclusion mechanisms have included the toll-booth, the need to place coins in a vending machine, a turnstile where tickets can be collected, and the check-out line at a retail store. In the digital world the common exclusion mechanism has been the password, which is now being supplemented by various types of digital locks and digital monitoring of usage.

Common examples of public goods include a lighthouse, street lighting, national defense and the air we breathe. With public goods, the construction of the demand curve is impeded as the rational buyer is not going to assign preferences to how much quantity of a good will be purchased at different prices. Hence the concept of total market failure. Table 1 reiterates the characteristics of public and private goods. All of the assumptions underlying the efficiency model are idealized, abstracted from reality, and oblivious to power relations.

pure public good	non–rival (joint) consumption; use does not result in depletion of the good	exclusion mechanism is not present
pure private good	rival consumption; use results in depletion of the good	exclusion mechanism is present

Table 1: Characteristic of Public and Private Goods

Much information policy making fails to look beyond the same types of assumptions underlying economic analysis and uncritically accepts the superiority of the market system as the ideal allocative mechanism. The assumption is that the public goods nature of information is a *problem* that needs to be *cured* in order for the price system to work properly. This "cure" involves crafting policies designed to induce scarcity, promote rivalry in consumption, and, most significantly, to create new exclusion and control mechanisms, all with resulting negative social costs. Some examples of negative social costs brought on by excessive emphasis on proprietary rights include barriers of access to educational and teaching materials in the case of copyright and barriers to access to seeds and essential medicines in the case of patents.

Information goods are inherently non-rival in consumption as they are not naturally subject to an exclusion mechanism. The physical container that holds the information (i.e. a printed book, a DVD) is itself rivalrous in its consumption and it is subject to an exclusion mechanism. But the information contained in the book or in the DVD itself is non-rival and not exhaustible. As information resources become digitized, we see a separation of the underlying intellectual good from the physical container that holds it. Further, the marginal cost for information goods approaches zero. For those with a stake in the market system, public goods present a serious problem.

Under the predominant efficiency-maximizing approach much in favor with contemporary policy-makers, these social costs are often justified based on the need to foster economic incentives. On the surface at least, it would seem that economic analysis plays an important role in the information policy process. But when one looks below the surface, it appears that the policy process is not driven by any real economic analysis as much as by the power of economic interests. In particular, copyright and patent policy developments can be located within a broader framework of commodification and the logic of capital, which require a critical theoretical framework rooted in political economy to address.

There is now a growing recognition that the division of the polity and the economy is an artificial one, and indeed a very ideological one at that. What holds these two fields together from a critical perspective is the recognition and criticism of existing power relations.

Applying the critical political economy approach to libraries

Getting back to Birdsall's analysis with respect to libraries, he summarizes his basic argument by saying:

> 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.

The framework of critical political economy could provide a useful way of thinking about the advocacy work of the library community.[2] Yet this approach is generally avoided as it would run up against norms of political neutrality. It would also require a departure from a conservative managerial approach because critical political economy is focused on questioning existing power relations. Library associations tend to be dominated by managers who will not call existing arrangements into question. Instead, library advocacy efforts are typically focused on the particular narrow issue at hand and are designed to obtain limited results. Birdsall says the most attention is given to library funding issues but that there is a need to go beyond 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.

Now there has certainly been an expansion of advocacy efforts beyond library funding issues – copyright and censorship come to mind. But even here we can see some serious problems that arise by taking a narrow institutional approach and not looking at broader political, economic and social questions.[3] By looking at issues in isolation and focusing on short term efforts, we often miss the inter-related aspects of various substantive issues and fail to recognize the central issue of power relationships which underlie them all.

It is essential that when we talk about individual information policy issues, be it digital locks, cuts to public information services (i.e., Library and Archives of Canada, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Statistics Canada, and

Canada Post) or the dismantling of publicly supported research programs; we have to look for how new exclusion mechanisms are being imposed and how they aid the transition from public good to private good, and ultimately how they weaken the public sphere. This movement is the operational essence of the process of commodification. It is the creation of an exclusion mechanism that is the key to commodification as rivalry in consumption is generally not an issue, especially in the case of digital goods.

It is important to note that not all restrictions on the "free flow of information" involve the imposition of an exclusion mechanism in order to facilitate commodity transactions. Laws protecting the privacy of personal information, as well as those that limit hate speech and obscenity are all examples of restrictions on otherwise "free flows" of information, but they are based on policy goals other than aiding in the transformation of a public good to a private good. But expanded copyright restrictions, new fees for services, cuts to public funding and contracting out are related to this transformation.

In addition, it is not enough to try to hold back the process of enclosure and commodification. We have to be thinking of ways to reverse the process once it has begun. Some examples of reversing the process include the adoption of user-friendly Open Access publishing and fair dealing policies, open data initiatives, and extending the public provision of information services. Where services have been contracted out, the contracts need to be carefully reviewed for compliance and reincorporating the services into the public sector should be considered. Similarly, in the crucial area of copyright policy, it is not enough for us to oppose new methods of enclosure (such as digital locks) but we also have to be thinking of alternatives to the existing IP regime that reward creators and encourage the production of art and science while de-emphasizing the market driven imperatives of strong proprietary exclusion mechanisms (See Murray & Trosow, 2013, p. 217-233).

Having put so much stress on the difference between the two competing paradigms of mainstream market-oriented economic analysis and critical political economy, we need to step back and realize we are not here to become economists or economic theorists. We are concerned about these economic issues as they relate to our field in a very concrete way which leads to the need to frame information services as an essential component of the public sphere.

The Library as Public Sphere

Gloria Leckie (2004) has written an exceptionally succinct and accessible article entitled "Three Perspectives on Libraries as Public Space" (see also Habermas, 1974, for an accessible encyclopedia entry on the public sphere). Leckie provides us with a good starting point to understand this concept and its importance for librarians.

She argues that the concept of the public sphere is important "because the spaces where members of the public congregate and mingle freely are seen as being essential to the public sphere, that area of life that is neither the home nor the sphere of the state" (p. 234).

Leckie boils Habermas down to a few essential concepts "in effect as a sphere of criticism of public authority" (p. 234). Historically, she says, "the public sphere was primarily a literary and discursive space, where debate on important public matters took place in: coffee houses, reading rooms, academies, salons and theatres and through the early mass media of books and journals" (pp. 234).

Eventually, she adds, specific public institutions began to emerge based on the idea of free and open access to information (and in particular the public library). Still, Leckie recognizes that the question of whether the library has met the challenge of being part of the public sphere is a contested one. Some think that public libraries have lost their focus on the "self-education of the citizenry to become participating members of democratic society" (p. 234) and have rather sought to become a popular attraction for entertainment to attract more users.[4] Leckie concludes with the observation that "there is plenty of evidence to show that public libraries are highly successful public spaces....and are still valued highly" (p. 236).

While recognizing some of the critiques of public library services (serving only certain segments of the population) Leckie maintains that:

> there is currently no other public space quite like the public library where citizens can engage in quiet reflection and study, able to pursue their own intellectual projects and personal growth free of the commercial practices and ideological positions that permeate almost every other aspect of life. (p. 236)

Speaking in 2004 she makes the observation that "...thankfully the 1990s are over and we can stop being seduced by the relentless advances in telecommunications technologies [and that] we can begin to see the forest instead of the trees" (p. 236). John Bushman had made the point a year earlier that "[l]ibraries as entertainment centers, as sites of economic (instead of democratic) value, and sites of potential customer identification are weakening libraries' embodiment of the public sphere" (2003, p. 75). There is ample evidence that in 2015 we are still in the same cycle of being overly-enamoured with technological advances, by the chasing of fads and by an emphasis on entertainment services in order to capture the attention of the public and funders. Some current examples include the captivation of some public libraries with entertainment centric "maker-spaces" and the emphasis on "data-management" in academic libraries.

Quite appropriately Leckie concludes her essay on the public sphere with another reference to John Buschman who says the threat to libraries as public space is not digital resources per se, but the ideology of the library as business and the pressure to conform to the model of the market place. Buschman asks: "As a society, do we really need another model of market and market-driven consumer space, or do we need another alternative in the public sphere" (2004, p. 42).

This question remains relevant in 2015, and it is imperative to the survival of our field that it be affirmatively addressed. We need to take a critical assessment of whether the recent practices of the library community (including library institutions themselves as well as the associations that purport to speak for them) are effectively asking this question and working toward effective solutions.

I would reframe the question and ask:

Is librarianship itself succumbing to the commodification of information and to the erosion of the public sphere, all to the detriment of what we had thought were our basic values of intellectual freedom, broad access to information and public control over the policies that determine information policies?

Responses to commodification and the erosion of the public sphere: Can we do better?

This section considers how the field of librarianship has, through its associations, responded to these developments and how could these responses be improved?

How we respond to the commodification of information and the erosion of the public sphere is the crucial challenge for progressive voices in the library community. Efforts to resist access-destructive commercialization of information goods and services and protect the public provision of these services are typically met with resistance. It is no surprise when commercial interests external to the library community take strong positions to protect their business models and extend them through new markets. What is more perplexing though is when these positions arise internal to the library community. Efforts to resist commodification and protect the public sphere are also met with resistance within the library community; they often will run right up against the persistent ideology of neutrality (Blanke, 1989), against the wall of institutional conservatism and risk-aversion (Trosow, 2010a), and against the continued allure of new technologies. All of these factors interact and will continue to plague library advocacy efforts to influence the policy-making process in order to counter commodification and to protect the library as a space in which the public sphere can flourish. Three recent examples will help illustrate the point. The first concerns developments at Library and Archives

Canada (PLG, Toronto Chapter, 2013), and the failure of the Canadian Library Association (CLA) to participate in the critique of LAC management (Oliphant and McNally, 2014; Dekker, 2012, 2012a; Lockhart, 2012). After the Canadian Association of University Teachers launched the "Save Libraries and Archives Canada" campaign in 2011, which was highly critical of LAC management (Save Libraries and Archives Canada, 2011), the CLA distanced itself from CAUT. Rejecting CAUT's critical approach, the CLA President said:

> While the Canadian Library Association shares some of the concerns outlined in your correspondence, particularly in the areas of acquisitions and the provision of services by qualified professional staff, we also understand that Library and Archives Canada must adapt to the digital age and address competing demands from its mandate as well as from the political realities of the day. With all federal departments facing increased scrutiny and requirements to produce significant budget reductions, LAC has to take difficult decisions with regard to its collection and services. (Adams, 2011)

The second example concerns copyright policies in educational institutions (Katz, 2012; Trosow, 2012), and CLA's failure to take an explicit position on the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC) Access Copyright model license which remains in effect in many colleges and universities. In a non-committal statement issued in June 2012 on the license, CLA said that the negotiation of blanket licenses "is a welcome development for post-secondary institutions" (CLA, 2012). It also said that: "CLA fully understands that university and college administrators must consider many factors before making decisions regarding the need for a license at their own institutions."[5]

The third example concerns the failure of CLA to issue a statement on the events leading up to the G-20 conference in Toronto in 2010, despite the recommendation from their Intellectual Freedom Advisory Committee that they do so:

> …after the Ontario provincial government quietly promulgated Regulation 233/10, the Advisory Committee prepared a position statement expressing concern and opposition to the use of the 70-year-old Public Works Protection Act to curtail freedom of expression during the Toronto G20 Summit. Our statement pointed out how these actions were at odds with CLA's Position Statement on Intellectual Freedom. We asked that CLA request the Government of Ontario to revoke the regulation before the summit, and also to review the Act under which it was adopted in order to ensure future transparency and accountability in the law-making process. Unfortunately, the CLA executive was not

> willing to adopt our recommendation, so CLA remained silent on the issue. (Trosow, 2011, p.11)[6]

All three of these examples evidence a flawed policy analysis which takes a narrow institutional approach and which fails to consider broader political, economic and social questions. In all three of these situations, CLA failed to consider, much less appreciate and act or recognize, the central issue of power relationships which underlie them all. In all three of these situations, the formulation of a response would have benefitted from an analysis informed by the concepts of political economy and the public sphere. All of these examples are also rooted in the neutrality principle, along with undue institutional conservatism and risk aversion on the part of CLA. The stubborn insistence on maintaining neutrality will time and again disable meaningful advocacy efforts and it will impair the ability of the library community to achieve its purposes. Insisting on neutrality will derail efforts to resist the commodification of information and the erosion of the public sphere.

We can't hold back from participating in the democratic process and stay silent on some things that need to be said. But the default has become abstaining from taking positions that may be contrary to some of our institutions or others in the profession.

The *Statement of Purpose of the Progressive Librarians Guild* links the protection of the public sphere with opposition to the commodification and enclosure of information within the context of a progressive librarianship:

A progressive librarianship demands the recognition of the idea that libraries for the people has been one of the principal anchors of an extended free public sphere which makes an independent democratic civil society possible, something which must be defended and extended. This is partisanship, not neutrality.

> Members of PLG do not accept the sterile notion of the neutrality of librarianship, and we strongly oppose the commodification of information which turns the 'information commons' into privatized, commercialized zones. We will help to dissect the implications of these powerful trends, and fight their anti-democratic tendencies. (n.p)

This statement has withstood the test of time as it remains fresh and relevant in the over two decades since its adoption. But these values need to be better infused into library associations more broadly, given more emphasis in our LIS programs, and generally incorporated into the advocacy work of the library community.

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NOTES

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2 Jennifer Dekker (2012) provides a broad definition of "library community" which (1) all information workers - managers, non-managers, librarians, archivists and other staff; and (2) all those invested in the products of libraries and library labour, including researchers, policy makers and (3) citizens.

3 See Trosow (*A Holistic Approach to Information Policy*, 2010) for several examples of this narrow institutional approach.

4 For example, the Edmonton Public Library states in their mission statement: "We are Edmonton's largest lender of all kinds of information and entertainment. We are experts in providing access to the world's information, ideas and entertainment - enabling a lifetime of learning, engagement and possibility for every Edmontonian." (n.d.). http://www.epl.ca/mission-values-business-plan They also recently won "Library of the Year" from Library Journal, the first Canadian library system to do so.

5 For a comparison of association reactions to the AUCC Model license, see the statements from the Newfoundland-Labrador Library Association http://nlla.ca/2012/05/09/nlla-advising-universities-colleges-not-to-sign-auccs-proposed-model-license-with-access-copyright/, the Atlantic Provinces Library Association http://apla.ca/?q=node/149 , and the British Columbia Library Association http://bclaconnect.ca/wp-uploads/2014/03/2012_Access_Copyright_resolution.pdf.

6 No formal statement was issued from CLA explaining why they rejected the recommendations of their Intellectual Freedom Advisory Committee. However, the British Columbia Library Association did send a letter expressing the concerns raised by the Committee (British Columbia Library Association, 2010).