

Editorial

Against Technopolistic Librarianship

We have witnessed the phenomenon over the past few decades of library schools dropping the word “library” from their names and becoming “i-schools.” But a recent article in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* business section cheerfully informs readers that the former “Carnegie Library of Homestead” has been “officially rebranded” as simply the “Carnegie of Homestead.”¹ This may be the first example of a public library actually dropping the word “library” from its official name. Even the Rangeview Library District in Colorado, which rebranded its libraries as “Anythink” a few years ago and stopped using traditional library job titles, still includes “library” (perversely perhaps) in its official name and branding materials.

The institution described in the article has always been multi-use, as are many public libraries. But it appears in this case that the “library” component is being relegated to the margins of what will henceforth be primarily a technology learning center, along with a concert hall and fee-based athletic club. Although the trend toward turning libraries into “technology spaces” is widespread, most institutions calling themselves “libraries” have continued to hold onto the word. This story may be an indicator of more far-reaching changes to come.

What the Post-Gazette article does not mention is that the governing board of what was then the Carnegie Library of Homestead summarily fired its MLS-degreed library administrators several years ago. It was only then that, as the article informs us, “board members and volunteers stepped up to help manage

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the facility.” The article also tells us that the current director “joined the board in 2010 and became full-time director of administration in 2012” and that her previous experience “included managing an art department and a call center for a manufacturing business.” The question of why a presumably self-respecting public library would be administered by an individual with no professional library degree or even experience working in a library is not addressed. Perhaps, since the “Carnegie of Homestead” is no longer a library, this is no longer an issue.

Of course, the Carnegie Not-Library of Homestead still maintains collections of books and other materials, which its board president refers to dismissively as “old-fashioned check-out book services.” But its real mission and goal is now “knowledge services,” defined by the board president as “technology-oriented learning” and lavishly funded with grants from Google, the Office of Naval Research, the Association for Unmanned Vehicle Systems, the Heinz Endowment and other charitable arms of the corporate-military-information-industrial complex.

The usual justification for converting libraries into technology learning centers offering robotics labs, creative software, and maker spaces with 3D printers is that such technologies support the STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) curriculum currently ascendant in the public schools. These are of course important and necessary subjects, and so few would argue that the justification is entirely without merit. But what is striking about the “library as technology learning center” philosophy is that it presents itself, not as an additional set of services and programs that libraries may or may not want to offer depending on the availability of space, funding and staffing, but as a new core mission that will save public libraries from themselves by replacing the apparently antiquated purpose of promoting literacy, free intellectual development through reading, and an enlightened citizenry.

We see this in the American Library Association’s relentless hyping of 3D printing as an almost magical technology that “democratizes creation,” “advances education and entrepreneurship” and helps build “cutting-edge skills for the innovation economy.” ALA urges libraries to “harness the power of 3D printing to achieve individual opportunity and progress in every part of our country.”²² The ridiculous hyperbole of such statements aside, the explicit linking of education with entrepreneurship and the emphasis on “cutting-edge skills” reveals the neoliberal ideology and hidden curriculum behind the techno-hype. In ALA’s rosy vision of the future, education is equated with passive assimilation into the global capitalist economy and thoroughly delinked from any notions about literacy, intellectual development and an enlightened citizenry. Andrew Carnegie himself, who pioneered the use of philanthropy as a tool of class domination and endowed the Carnegie Library of Homestead only after the steelworkers union there was safely crushed, would surely be proud.

ALA and the library establishment are also ignoring air quality and workplace safety concerns related to the proliferation of 3D printing in libraries. Research findings on 3D printers and hazardous particle emissions, which suggest possible adverse effects on staff and patron health of operating 3D printers in tightly-enclosed, climate-controlled library buildings, have been publicly available since 2013. We should be invoking the precautionary principle and insisting that, until it can be demonstrated conclusively that 3D printers will not adversely affect the health of library workers and patrons, we should not be operating them in libraries.³

Over two decades have passed since the late social critic Neil Postman coined the word “technopoly” to describe “the tendency in American culture to turn over to technology sovereignty, command, control over all of our social institutions.”⁴ What we increasingly have now is a technopolistic librarianship, a kind of “gizmolgy” that places more value on technology and gadgets than it does on books and the potentially liberating knowledge they contain. Which is to say: not a librarianship at all.

NOTES

- 1 “Carnegie of Homestead broadens its offerings.” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. January 3, 2016. <http://www.post-gazette.com/business/pittsburgh-company-news/2016/01/03/Carnegie-of-Homestead-broadens-its-offerings>
- 2 “Policymakers: 3D printing in libraries advances education and entrepreneurship.” American Library Association. <http://www.ala.org/news/press-releases/2015/12/policymakers-3d-printing-libraries-advances-education-and-entrepreneurship-1>
- 3 “Ultrafine particle emissions from desktop 3D printers.” *Atmospheric Environment* 79 (November 2013), 334–339. <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1352231013005086>
- 4 Postman, Neil. *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology*. New York: Vintage, 1993.