

Andrew Abbott and the Future of Librarianship

In exploring the future of librarianship, Andrew Abbott goes beyond the sociological approach of examining librarianship in terms of its aim to status as a full-fledged profession. Instead, he looks at the jurisdiction of librarian's work and forces that push against librarians and their work. The future of librarianship, Abbott argues, is contingent on the link between librarians and their work. Forces, such as information technology, have changed the work of librarians, creating new work and eliminating old work. He discusses the current dimensions of librarian's work and in what contexts change can be expected: the context of larger social and cultural forces, the context of competing occupations, and the context of other forms of expertise in commodities and organizations. Abbott discusses how librarianship must evolve in order to maintain jurisdiction over its work.

Social Forces

Technological change is one of the most important of the social forces affecting librarians' work. Technology makes old things easier to do, fully replaces earlier things, or enables things that have never been done before. Library technology will not end up replacing librarians. Abbott does see conflict rising from increased dependence on proprietary databases and electronic subscription journals. Libraries will need to absorb the costs of electronic resources if they want to maintain control over "the structure(s) of knowledge" (Abbott, 1998, n.p.). Absorbing such costs will force a conflict between commercialism and professionalism and increase libraries' dependence on organizations for support.

Another social force that affects librarians' work is change in the basic clientele for information. Commercial organizations' need for information is being met by commercial

providers not libraries, although small businesses still look to local libraries for market data.

"Information is being gathered, centralized, and sold completely outside the normal channels of libraries by market research and consulting firms" (Abbott, 1998, n.p.). This is a challenge to one of librarian's claims of jurisdiction: meeting the information needs of its community.

Libraries are now having to compete for their most important clients: the state. State and local government agencies that have funded libraries now support many social services. This competition for limited federal and state dollars comes out as hiring freezes putting at risk traditional library work.

Cultural Forces

The new information society is suffering from data overload. Abbott claims that, while the technologies for storing data have improved, the technology for retrieving information lags behind. Technology provides methods for analysis of quantitative data, but automated means for extracting information don't exist. Research in artificial intelligence (AI) may develop technology in retrieval and summarization of qualitative information. If so, Abbott sees possible conflicts of jurisdiction with the AI people.

Abbott recognizes a drift toward images in modern culture. Because of this, a future "war...will pit print against images for centuries to come" (1998, n.p.). School libraries and media centers will be one of the battlegrounds. Librarian and audiovisual (AV) people will battle over who will control the cultural resources. Abbott predicts that the AV people will win unless librarians co-opt the AV field. He suggests that the move toward images will produce new work, and that librarians should absorb both the work and the people who do it.

Abbott sees multiculturalism impacting how librarians make value judgments about materials selection. The public in the future might want a more democratic approach to how

public money is spent, such as a say in what books and images are acquired. Such a move toward democratization of acquisitions could impact librarian's jurisdiction.

Competing Occupations

Change in social and cultural forces brings new professional competitors to librarianship, such as audiovisual people, the artificial intelligence people, the computer people, and commercial providers. Librarians will compete with other experts for control over information resources and the jurisdiction of information providers.

Forms of Expertise

Expertise will survive both in individuals and in organizations. No commodity will appear that will make librarians obsolete. Although librarians will not be replaced by computers, some areas of library work will be taken over by machines. The outcome of this, Abbott claims, is more vertical differentiation--a smaller professional elite that is concerned with setting up the information resources and a larger group of providers that brings clients to the resources.

Expertise in organizations will increase in librarianship--organizations will dominate. Librarians have always worked for organizations and not as self-contained providers. According to Abbott, librarianship is a federated profession, a "loose aggregate of groups doing different kinds of work but sharing a common orientation," and as such adapts well to current and future changes in work (Abbott, 1998, n.p.).

References

Abbott, Andrew. (1998). Professionalism and the future of librarianship. *Library Trends*, 45, 430-444. Retrieved December 18, 2003, from InfoTrac Web: Expanded Academic ASAP.