



EDITORIAL

Editorial

Ranganathan's relevance in the 21st century

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Abstract

Purpose – To discuss the importance of S.R. Ranganathan's teachings for librarians in the 21st century.

Design/methodology/approach – The article is a reflective piece examining Ranganathan's five laws of library science in their modern context.

Findings – That we owe as much of a debt to Ranganathan today as we did when he first published his five laws in the 1920s. His laws remain relevant in numerous areas of modern library and information practice, and will continue to be reinterpreted by the profession for a long time to come.

Practical implication – The paper argues for a revisiting of the works of Ranganathan and a continued championing of them in the library world.

Originality/value – The value of the paper is in examining traditional library values in the modern era

Keywords Librarianship, Librarians, Information science, Laws

Paper type Viewpoint

Attending an international conference can be an uplifting experience. Being present at sessions where you feel proud to be part of your chosen profession makes you realise how lucky you are to be in a room with like-minded souls who are striving for the same values. For me a reawakening of sorts occurred when I attended my second IFLA Conference in Berlin in 2003. Presiding over the opening session was Ranga Yogeshwar, a young German-based scientist. His relevance to the conference was not in what he had done but what his grandfather had done, for Ranga was the grandson of S.R. Ranganathan. I recall being in absolute awe at the warmth of the reception given to Ranga by the delegates; it was almost as if he himself was the great man. At that point I knew I had to learn much more than I already did about the writings of Ranganathan, and just why they were so highly valued by the global representatives of our profession gathered in that Berlin conference hall.

S.R. Ranganathan had yet to publish his *Five Laws of Library Science* when this journal began its life 80 years ago, however in any period where one is reflecting on the history of a journal focused on library science it would be remiss not to focus on the five laws that have inspired our profession for almost the same period. Yet I have to confess to being one of those librarians who, having gained my Masters in the mid 1990s, was given very little exposure to the teachings of S.R. Ranganathan. Of course having worked in a large library for many years before qualifying professionally I was aware of his name, especially from the more mature librarians who held his creed close to their professional hearts. I also knew of his five laws, but I had never really studied them closely, nor had occasion to read any of his wider writings on librarianship. More importantly the dated language in Ranganathan's *Five Laws* was off-putting to me, and as such I had neither occasion nor great desire to reflect on them in my early career. Perhaps this was because I met several librarians who used the language used by Ranganathan to reinforce their own prejudices that we should focus our energies on



books and ignore new technologies. Faced with this mindset from some colleagues I asked myself what exactly the five laws offered the librarian in the 21st century.

The five laws (Ranganathan, 1931)

The first law – books are for use: In an age where libraries are increasingly judged in terms of their performance by a focus on issue statistics, the first law seems as much a concern as it was 75 years ago. It is imperative to ensure library patrons use the materials we select and purchase for them.

Libraries are not just about storing books, they are about people having access to books. This is something Ranganathan made clear in his own discussion of the first law, as he cited the historical importance previously placed on preservation of books above access. Obviously both should be of concern, but this is where the digital technologies that Ranganathan could only have dreamt of have their most vital role. We are blessed with the opportunity of making available to many the knowledge of mankind through continuing emphasis on digitisation. As my colleagues and I argued in a previous article (Chowdhury *et al.*, 2006), digitisation skills are now core skills for anyone who wishes to be a librarian in the 21st century, and this can easily be justified by focusing on the priorities laid down in the first law. Books are indeed for use, and if conversion from analogue to digital creates many more users for the one title then I am sure Ranganathan would have welcomed such a process with open arms.

The first law is also forward thinking in terms of its emphasis on library location. Increasingly we are seeing libraries sited, or even relocated, in more accessible locations in order to increase custom. A trend in the UK has been to merge public libraries with other services, such as sports centres, or move the library location to main thoroughfares rather than outlying parts of the community. Simple logic, but essential all the same if the library is to be accessible to the user. Location also relates to the virtual library concept. As a university employee I can access many of the journals I require at any time of the day or night from any part of the world – all I need is a computer. Again this is at the heart of the modern interpretation of the first law – the location for use may not be the library at all and increasingly is not.

The second law – every person his or her Book: The second law is perhaps the most understated; even Ranganathan himself acknowledged that within this one principle lies so much of what libraries mean for society. On a basic examination we could conclude that the law relates to the fact that we all have diverse interests and that there is a book out there to satisfy that for all of us, and it would indeed be a correct interpretation of one facet of the law. Brought up to date we could argue that for “every book” we substitute “every piece of knowledge” and we would then cover electronic publications and other media easily. However this interpretation merely scratches the surface of the second law; at its core is the need to fight for the right of users to information of all kinds, the consistent battle against censorship and inequality of access that has governed civilisation since its inception. Our duty is to help users find the information they require and ensure any blocks in the way are not blocks we have created. The barring of access to knowledge is anathema to the second law, and it would be interesting to see how Ranganathan would consider the issue of Internet filtering in libraries across the world. Certainly his law does not call for every person to have his or her book as long as it does not offend another person or group’s sensitivities. It could be argued that the second law is the one that we must continuously defend above all others, since it at its root is the freedom for people to

access writings of all kinds and inform their own minds on topics that others may wish to suppress.

The second law also needs to be cherished because it reminds us to be impartial in our dealings with users. We may not like what they request from us, we may think a book or other resource is low-brow, but we should never place our own prejudices in the way of access. This is as crucial if our prejudices are based on political or religious beliefs, when we must be careful to ensure that we represent the beliefs of other communities responsibly. Ensuring a collection is representative of the community that a librarian represents is absolutely vital.

The third law: every book its reader: The need to provide easy access to materials is one way of putting people together with what they require. Equally, putting books into the hands of people who do not necessarily know which book they need is at the heart of the third law. We could interpret reader development as being part of the third law, since within its remit we promote books to the users that may not be known to them and that we feel may offer them opportunities for enrichment that other titles do not.

Historically reference work has always been identified within the third law too, and this continues to be the case in the area of the virtual library. Virtual reference services continue to grow in popularity in both academic and public libraries. In the UK the Museum Libraries and Archives Council (2006) has launched a virtual enquiry service as part of its People's Network website, mirroring much of the best practice developed over the past few years by university libraries across the world. These are exciting developments, focused on expanding services to where and when users may need them. They allow librarians to continue to use their skills in tracking down quality information for users and will become a staple feature of many library services.

The fourth law – save the time of the reader: Saving the time of the reader has always been a concern of the librarian. It is after all why we create catalogues, bibliographies, indexes and abstracts. In the analogue world this was an important concept, but in the virtual its importance has increased dramatically.

Saving the time of the reader also relates to how we actually organise information. Often we can become so obsessed with the standards of cataloguing at the expense of a user. While catalogues are tools for retrieving items accurately, they become items that waste the time of the reader if items are haphazardly catalogued or if the cataloguing is excessively focused on the intricacies of the art. Many public libraries use simplified forms of Dewey with no more than four numbers after the point, which to a cataloguer may seem like sacrilege. However when considering the time of the user as a vital notion, a simple and effective system is what is called for.

In addition, the Internet poses significant problems, and indeed Noruzi (2004) recently reinterpreted Ranganathan's five laws and argued all five as being transferable to the Web. Increasingly it will be the case that saving the time of the user becomes navigating with them through the Web and ensuring we create high quality and accurate guides to information in this challenging domain.

The fifth law – the library is a growing organism: The library of the 21st century continues to be a growing organism. Perhaps we can look at so much digital information and conclude that the growth is not as pressing from the point of view of physical space, although this remains something many libraries will always struggle with. Even in the digital world, the analogue continues to be important. Book publishing remains healthy, and indeed a much less expensive endeavor than it was in 1931. Libraries will continue to struggle with space problems with regards to providing

comprehensive collections to users. Perhaps we will see a growth in resource sharing amongst libraries in a bid to combat this.

Space is certainly an issue in a world where more and more materials are being delivered digitally. The sacrifices librarians have to make between space for books shelves and space for computer terminals to deliver this ever expanding need will be a growing one. In my own experience, book shelves making way for computers can be an especially controversial action if it is not handled properly, and it can be something that is received badly by both staff and users if it is done without appropriate consideration.

We can also interpret the library as a growing organism in relation to its impact on staffing and skills. As a library grows it may move into new areas of concern; we have already used digitisation as an example of this. As the library grows in terms of its services the skills of the library that will be necessary to deliver these new services will also grow. Perhaps we could argue that both libraries and the profession of librarianship are growing organisms?

Values for the future

Ranganathan's five laws continue to give us a blueprint for our professional values that is as relevant now as it was in 1931. The language may be seen as restrictive, but the underlying values inherent in them means they can be continuously reinterpreted for the future, and are being so (Chappell, 1976; Chowdhury *et al.*, 2006; Croft, 2001; Gorman, 1998; Kuronen and Pekkarinen, 1999; Leiter, 2003; Naun, 1994; Noruzi, 2004; Satija, 2003).

There is no better time for us as a profession to reawaken our debt to the classic texts that inspired previous generations of librarians and led to librarianship being a profession valued across the globe. Ranganathan proposed only five laws for our profession – but within those five laws lies much that is vital for equality, education, and the furtherance of human kind through access to libraries and the information they store. Five simple statements that say so much of what we are about, and what we strive to achieve for society.

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