

I access, therefore I am

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A common conception of a library is that it facilitates the acquisition of knowledge, which may in turn develop a person's understanding and wisdom. This occurs through resourcing, collecting and disseminating information. Libraries are thus the givers of information — giving to a community of users. Business, generally speaking, comes from a different paradigm, one of trading.

Information is developed through the resources of a community, produced by the particular efforts of certain individuals. Without the knowledge base of the community, the individuals would not have the raw materials with which to produce their packets of meaning. The question thus arises as to what degree the individuals who create information can claim it as their own property. If the creators of information have any moral obligation to ensure that the community benefits to an equal or greater extent than what they do, then it has to be a duty sanctioned by the community of which that individual is a participant member. In contemporary society, utilitarian considerations are not powerful enough to deny an individual their right to property, with the exception of the community requiring those resources in order to survive. Most information does not have that status.

If the creators (or investors) of information are the exclusive owners, or have a controlling stake in it, then under a libertarian framework (which is congruent with today's dominant economy), they are free to use it as they choose. However this brings to light a new clash of values: libraries exist to ensure the *flow* of information, whereas to own property is to *withhold* it.

If libraries become more like portals to information rather than collectors, then they are reinforcing the concept of private ownership, for the documents go direct to the end user and do not linger in areas of public browsing. The question arises as to whether, in serving such 'user pays customers', professional integrity is sufficiently maintained, or whether such market-driven delivery is a corruption of the value 'to ensure the free flow of information and ideas to present and future generations'.

It is commonly claimed that individuals have the right to political, spiritual and intellectual self-direction, with all members of the human community being obliged to be responsible for creating conditions that allow those rights to be fulfilled. If some individuals do not take up that responsibility, then by implication they give up their right to claim them. All members of the community are

equal in this respect. However, not all members are equal with respect to the actualisation of these rights, for economic opportunity is not equal.

If the economic and material conditions do not allow for self-actualisation, then the right to it is practically worthless. It is simply not enough to consider the right for self-actualisation as a negative right, whereby individuals should be left to pursue their interests without interference. Instead there is a call to give self-actualisation the status of a positive right, whereby the community should be proactive in ensuring that conditions for self-actualisation are materialised.

The question thus arises as to what role a library should play, how active should they become in making sure that a person's right to self-actualisation can be achieved? Are librarians and information professionals the ones who do have that special obligation to ensure equality of access, even though the dominant market forces compel them towards becoming traders rather than givers?

How one sees the relationship between mind, information and society underlies one's conception of information rights. If information is data to be used by minds, as a commodity, then why not put a price on it, according to its scarcity, its utility and the amount of effort put into developing it? If the mind is a container that holds items, then why not claim exclusive property rights? But what if the mind is subservient to information, as a medium through which ideas emerge, propagate and then seed themselves in other minds to continue their development? What responsibilities thus emerge? How are we to decide the value of knowledge and to avoid provincial warfare over the righteousness of strains of thought — and of people?

The concept of rights goes hand in hand with concepts of the primacy of the individual and of a human-centric universe. To move to a more enlightened appreciation of one's place in the growth of the universe is to gain freedom from the constraints of rights. This idealistic strategy is beyond the immediate concerns of libraries, as they struggle to survive and to maintain their professional values. And yet it is a target that is congruent with such values (though one such value is to recognise and respect intellectual property rights).

The concepts of rights stem from the given that we own ourselves. If we don't even own ourselves, then we can have no claim to ownership of anything else. ■

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