Intellectual Freedom and Sensitive Knowledge: Embracing Pluralism in the Process of Knowing

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Classification by subject has been a fixture of library service for hundreds of years. The perpetuation of systems such as Dewey Decimal Classification is evidence of the panoptic vision of our profession, where the value of universal access to information is rarely disputed. However, given the statement “Information standards necessarily reflect the biases of their designers,” I think it is worthwhile to explore the inherent bias that can be found in the concepts of universal access and intellectual freedom. This may be stretching the definition of ‘information standard,’ but given the growing realization that was previously considered ‘objective’ scientific knowledge is in fact socially-constructed (Bowker 2005), an assessment of the epistemological origins of intellectual freedom is a salient discussion for information professionals.

This essay aims to discuss how Western intellectual tradition promulgates the idea that all information should be available to any interested seeker. Almost without exception, librarians heatedly defend governmental and political challenges to universal access, with much of the debate revolving around the highly-charged concepts of censorship and free speech. However, there is one domain where the bias behind universal access and intellectual freedom is being rendered in sharp contrast. In a post-colonial world, increasing attention is being given to the agency and sovereignty of indigenous communities. The time has come for information professionals to acknowledge the disjunctures between the epistemological basis of intellectual freedom and the sensitive, sacred, and proprietary nature of some domains of indigenous knowledge.

Over the last decades, an increasing recognition of the sovereignty of indigenous groups around the world has led to some drastic shifts in the practice of cultural institutions. For instance, museums across North America and Australasia have had to accede to the values of pluralism and repatriate objects and human remains to the groups from which those artifacts originated. This represents a drastic recentering of Western academic practice which derives knowledge from the objective collection and study of artifacts. As this paper will argue, the paradigmatic shift that repatriation has
heralded is highly relevant to the field of information studies and to the continued ethical practice of librarians. If librarianship is truly committed to pluralism, then we must consider carefully the epistemological basis of intellectual freedom and acknowledge the situations where a different set of values may be more appropriate.

This paper will make this argument by considering three overlapping facets of the issue of information access and culturally sensitive knowledge. First, I will examine the nature of knowledge as secular and reproducible in Western thought, and will critically examine how this constitutes a bias which has formed the foundation for current ethical guidelines protecting intellectual freedom. Second, I will discuss the junctures between sovereignty, the right to silence, and the right to free speech, and the many ways in which these junctures are applicable to librarianship. Third, this essay will offer some exploratory models for developing a more nuanced appreciation of intellectual freedom.

1. Knowledge as Secular and Reproducible

Few scholars would dispute the influence of European intellectual tradition over contemporary academic discourse, but we also need to carefully consider what exactly we inherited from that tradition. This section explores that ‘inheritance’ by first addressing knowledge as a reproducible entity, and second, knowledge as a secular entity. My aim is to connect the lessons that museums have learned about the ‘objective’ study of objects with the way information is handled in librarianship.

Information has been considered reproducible for a long time before digital technology allowed the replication of vast amounts of text in an instant. Undoubtedly, the reproducible quality we ascribe to information and knowledge has been made possible by the development of writing and the invention of printing. Ong (1982) attributes the development of modern science to the “exactly repeatable visual statement” afforded by the printing press (Ong 1982: 127). The new precision and exactitude permitted by printing meant a whole new level of access and availability for representations of knowledge, especially scientifically-derived knowledge. Also,
abstraction, or a separation between the knower and what is known, permits us to regard information as something external to our consciousness (Hobart and Schiffman 1998). Despite this, we think of knowledge is something carried around in our heads. Teaching and learning both bear the connotation of transference. Knowledge is copied when it is passed on from the teacher to the learner; it becomes a possession of both teacher and learner. What is important to note is how we think of ownership in relationship to this process of replication and transferrence; we do not usually consider giving someone information to be the same as giving them a physical object. Even though we ascribe a kind of ownership to writing words down (i.e. authorship), the reader is not thought as taking ownership of the author’s words in the act of reading, as if those words were a physical object. However, that sensibility has been shown to be culturally constructed (Clifford 1997). Knowledge can be proprietary; as such it is enmeshed in complex issues of ownership and control that go beyond the existing models of intellectual property. The current concept of intellectual property does not completely address the emerging issues around indigenous traditional knowledge.

Scientifically-produced knowledge is inherently secular. Objective study of natural phenomena is rational, methodical, and linear. The irony of the objective narrative of science is how it has been applied to the scientific study of other cultures in the social sciences. The “-ology” of anthropology has made a systematic study of humanity, and has rendered scientific knowledge about other cultures freely accessible in academic libraries worldwide. Anthropology has followed the scientific model of the reification of knowledge through its dissemination of texts. And while the discipline has made admirable strides in spite of its colonial history (Clifford 1988), the fact still remains that anthropology was built on the methods of natural science. ‘Natural mankind’ was out in the world, and through careful study, a well-trained social scientist could make meaning out of their way of life, and claim as her own the knowledge she learned from her informants in the field. The paradox here is that a large part of anthropological literature is devoted to the study of religion and spiritualism. Although
it is about spiritual subjects, the anthropological literature itself is secular, reproducible, and freely available to all. While anthropology is beginning to acknowledge the often-ignored importance of informants with increasing numbers of co-authored texts and academically-trained indigenous scholars, the issue of sacred-knowledge-turned-secular still remains. Considering the sensitive, proprietary, or outright secret nature of a great deal of this (now-published) sacred knowledge, it becomes clear why this is a relevant issue for librarians to address. Laforet (2004) summarizes this dilemma:

> For someone raised to see as positive the ideas that knowledge is secular and universally available, and that anyone can overcome the constraints of class and economic disadvantage to gain authority through scientific study, it is hard to grasp in a visceral way that, to someone for whom the knowledge associated with certain objects is lineage property, these impacts of the Western system might not be positive, and the levelling of objects within a [museum] collection might be incomprehensible or even offensive (Laforet 2004: 45).

What is clear from this statement is that the value of universal access may not be valuable to all. The Western bias that information and knowledge are secular and reproducible may be alienating to indigenous people who have historically endured marginalization and been denied self-determination. The time has come to explore the possibilities of not just object repatriation, but also “knowledge repatriation” (“Protocols” 2006).

### 2. Silence, Speech, and Sovereignty

As a representation of culture, writing is remarkably different from oral systems. That difference has yielded deep insight into the nature of cultural reproduction and knowledge. Written texts are more accessible and easily disseminated when compared with oral transmission of cultural knowledge. Writing assumes an audience, but it does not dictate who that audience is. On the other hand, a storyteller in an oral culture has direct control over who hears his story. An author has no such control, and what he writes is available and accessible to all who can read it. And while this lack of control/availability of access is almost without exception considered a universal good, I maintain that there are circumstances where this access must be reconsidered, especially
in the domain of proprietary or sensitive indigenous knowledge.

We are still grappling with the vestiges of our colonial past in academia, and the discipline of anthropology is no exception. As discussed above, researchers are no longer given academic license to ‘collect’ cultures as if they were specimens of natural history (Clifford 1988: 230). Over the last few decades, anthropological research has had to reconsider its positivist foundations, resulting in a new paradigm of practice. Anthropology has undergone profound shifts, both methodologically and ethically. Reflexive ethnography now acknowledges the impact that the researcher has on the research being done. Researchers are developing ongoing relationships with informants as stakeholders in the research process (Srinivasan 2006). Academically-trained indigenous researchers are reversing the anthropological gaze. Co-authored texts are increasingly unsettling notions of authority and expertise. Anthropology has been making room to accommodate pluralism, and these shifts in practice have specific implications for cultural institutions.

The lofty ideals of documents like the ALA’s Intellectual Freedom Manual (2006) espouse the values of universal access and a library free of censorship. Freedom of access to information is considered a precondition of the freedom of speech, and rational debate and discourse is considered an integral part of a democratic society. However, a question that rarely gets asked is about the ways in which freedom of speech might also operate in reverse. Does indigenous sovereignty extend to a retroactive right to remain silent about domains of sensitive or proprietary knowledge? Can the concept of intellectual freedom also accommodate requests to withdraw what was recorded and disseminated in the midst of dubious ethical practices in an earlier era?

Phillips (2004) narrates an account of just such a withdrawal as she describes the “disappearing acts” of a whole category of Iroquois wooden masks, which the Iroquois have patiently and systematically worked to repatriate and remove from public view. She states that:
collectively, these ‘disappearing acts’ represent a grand refusal of key Western traditions for the production and disposition of knowledge. They set limits on classic methods of study—objectification, comprehensiveness, and critical analysis—and they erode the idea of universal access to knowledge created by technologies of exposure and display in museums, archives, and universities (Phillips 2004: 56).

Systematic scientific inquiry may not be as universally beneficial as we would like to assume; there are instances where in fact it may do more harm than good. Restrictions placed on access are not necessarily just the result of parochial thinking, but are in fact a central and undisputable issue when dealing with certain domains of indigenous knowledge. Phillips declares that, “the ethics and politics of pluralism require that museums and academic institutions attend seriously and respectfully to requests that render some objects invisible” (Phillips 2004: 56). Likewise, libraries ought to reconsider the boundaries of universal access in an increasingly pluralistic cultural milieu.

What I am calling for is a creative extension of the concept of right to silence. Article 18 of the U.N.’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights asserts the right “to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media regardless of frontiers.” Upon consideration, one can infer that the right to impart information also means that a person has a right to withhold that information if she so chooses. The heart of the issue is that indigenous people have not always been made aware of those rights; anthropologists have not always clearly conveyed their intentions of appropriating and publishing about sensitive topics; and the enduring permanence of sensitive knowledge in academic texts emerges as a central issue that librarians, as the stewards of those texts, must face.

In discussing a collaborative archival project in Australia called Trust and Technology, Russell (2005) describes how the archival records the project is making available are considered by Aboriginal people to be the result of surveillance (Russell 2005: 6). This problematizes the way we usually think about research in indigenous communities, since ‘surveillance’ has a much different connotation from ‘research,’ though they are describing the same activity. As indigenous groups increasingly assert
their human rights, cultural institutions must recognize that the indigenous right of silence about sensitive and proprietary knowledge applies retroactively. This should not be dismissed as censorship, but healing the scars of the colonial project.

3. Models for Action

Considering the above discussion, we are left with the practical question of what we can do to mitigate the bias behind universal access. Numerous recent projects indicate the growing interest of cultural institutions in developing a more nuanced understanding of intellectual freedom. What follows is a discussion of the practical lessons to be learned from these various projects which all espouse a more sensitive approach towards indigenous knowledge.

The Trust and Technology Project, mentioned above, is a collaboration between the Public Records Office of Victoria (Australia), the Centre for Australian Indigenous Studies, and the School of Information Management and Systems at Monash University. Russell, a principle investigator on the project, asserts that Trust and Technology is not about ‘collecting’ oral memory, but first asks if and how indigenous Australians want their stories incorporated into the archival service that the project aims to develop (Russell 2005: 5). The notion of ‘access’ is being redefined to include two things: first, a right of reply, which allows people to “set the record straight” by contributing ongoingly to records held in public institutions; and second, control over access and collection, now and in the future (Russell 2005: 10). Trust and Technology makes use of a community advisory committee, which provides feedback, helps to identify community priorities, and allows for input on the direction for research (Russell 2005: 6). Furthermore, an “academically and community minded” Aboriginal Liaison Officer is employed with the project, allowing for an extensive dialogue with interested communities (Russell 2005: 8). A central challenge is overcoming the distrust and concern that indigenous communities may have of institutions like archives, museums, and libraries (Russell 2005: 6). Russell states that “it is essential for relationship building that the Indigenous community is a crucial and inalienable part of the decision-making
process with regard to how their oral traditions and memories should be handled” (Russell 2005: 6). This project demonstrates that outreach goes beyond just bringing indigenous groups into the institution. As stakeholders, the insight of indigenous communities should be included both foundationally and ongoingly.

The recently issued “Protocols for Native American Archival Materials” also demonstrates the centrality of a “culturally responsive” approach in the practices of information repositories (“Protocols,” Introduction). These protocols were developed by a wide variety of Native American and non-Native American scholars, librarians, archivists, historians, curators, and anthropologists. The protocols state that:

Archivists and librarians taught to champion intellectual freedom and unfettered access to resources may be troubled by the notion that in Native American and other Indigenous communities knowledge can be collectively owned and that access to some knowledge may be restricted as a privilege rather than a right (Section 2: Striving for Balance in Content and Perspective).

However, the protocols also point out that the two approaches to information are not irreconcilable. The key is collaboration and mutual respect for the needs of indigenous groups, scholars, and information institutions. The protocols advocate conversation and negotiation between indigenous communities and cultural institutions.

In determining the new role of the museum in a landscape of repatriation and controversy, museums have been learning a great deal from community collaborations. Rather than inviting indigenous participation in a simple process of ‘consultation,’ increasingly museums are figuring out how to establish relationships of deep collaboration with stakeholder communities. Furthermore, museums are acknowledging the accountability that they have in displaying and representing the cultural identities of indigenous groups (Clifford 1997: 437). Phillips states that museums:

are learning that they must modify the Western ideals of open access to objects and information on which public museums were founded, in order to respect other systems of knowledge management. In their exhibits and public programs they are finding ways to accommodate multiple narratives of history and culture based on different kinds of truth claims
Objects in museum storerooms are not necessarily “owned” by those institutions; increasingly the metaphor is becoming one of stewardship or custodianship. And with that conceptual shift comes a reevaluation of the Western notions of access and availability, a shift to which librarianship should pay attention.

Lastly, a growing literature in information studies is articulating the intersections between pluralism and conceptions of knowledge. The theory of multiple ontologies advocates that multiple descriptions and contexts should be all be accommodated in the description of museum objects rather than the single authoritative voice previously used by cultural institutions (Boast, Bravo, and Sriniviasan in press). This concept reflects an emerging sensibility about the distributed nature of ownership and attribution. Reconceptualizing Digital Objects (which this author is involved in) is a collaborative project based on the theory of multiple ontologies. Academics from UCLA and Cambridge University (UK) are working in partnership with the Zuni people to collect indigenous descriptions of Zuni objects held by Cambridge. Rather than just add those descriptions to the way that the museum already interprets the Zuni artifacts, RDO aims to rethink the way that objects are catalogued in Western museums. We are hoping to borrow from the emergent model of digital technologies like wikis, blogs, and tagging, and in doing so, let the people speak for themselves.

The characteristic that all these projects have in common is a recognition that the Western system of conceptualizing and handling information should not be applied without due consideration. The standard approach that institutions have regarding information access and intellectual freedom is biased, and this bias originates from the way that Western thinking regards knowledge. As this paper has shown, many of the values behind intellectual freedom are culturally constructed, and as such they are problematic when applied to certain domains of sensitive or proprietary indigenous knowledge. Therefore, librarians must consider the implications of pluralism on library service, and should work in collaboration with indigenous communities to establish...
protocols that consider carefully the ideals of access and availability to all.
References


