There is Nothing New Under the Sun? Reflections on "The New Librarianship" and the Theological Library

Abstract

The entirety of R. David Lankes's model of "New Librarianship" rests on his expression of its mission: "The mission of librarians is to improve society through facilitating knowledge creation in their communities." The present essay defines and expands upon the facets of "facilitating," "knowledge creation," and "communities," and explores the shapes these may take in theological libraries in particular. Regarding "community," the essay considers the challenge of serving both academics and ministers and how it might be possible to foster a less disjointed community. The question of what "knowledge creation" looks like in the fields of religious studies and pastoral training, and what this uniqueness means for the library are also considered. Finally, the author offers some preliminary ideas of what facilitating this knowledge creation might look like in the context of a theological library. Current shifts within academe and its libraries require a shift in the way librarians (particularly theological librarians) think about service, resources, and their role in the education process as a whole.

Introduction

Is there a thing of which it is said,

"See, this is new"?

It has already been,

in the ages before us.

--Ecclesiastes 1:10

When you're 25 years old (like I am), everything seems new, even (especially?) what's old.[1] It would be interesting to engage in a thorough semiotic grammatology of the "newness" of R. David Lankes's "New Librarianship," but such an exploration would miss the point entirely. Higher education and its libraries *are* changing and requiring a shift in the way librarians think about service, resources, and their role in the education process as a whole. Theological libraries — whether in seminaries, small liberal arts colleges, or large research universities — are not exempt, and it is incumbent on them to adapt with (or even blaze trails ahead of) their institutions.

Lankes's New Librarianship[2] offers a model to navigate this shift adroitly, shifting away from a focus on materials and artifacts to an engagement in knowledge and community. "The mission of librarians," says Lankes, "is to improve society through facilitating knowledge creation in their communities."[3] In the present essay, I'll define and expand upon the facets of "facilitating," "knowledge creation," and "communities," and explore the shapes these may take in theological libraries in particular. I'll offer some ideas of what "facilitation" might look like in the context of a theological library;

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[1] Speaking of which, I still need someone to teach me how to use a card catalog(!)

[2] Lankes is a professor at Syracuse University's School of Information Studies. His work on the New Librarianship mainly comprises two books: *The Atlas of New Librarianship* and *Expect More*. He taught a MOOC on New Librarianship in the summer of 2013 (http://ischool.syr.edu/future/grad/newlibopencourse.aspx), much material from which, including video lectures, can be found on the Atlas's companion site: http://www.newlibrarianship.org/wordpress/

[3] R. David Lankes, *The Atlas of New Librarianship* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011), 15.

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I'll consider what "knowledge creation" looks like in the fields of religious studies and pastoral training, and what this uniqueness means for the library. All of these reflections will be framed within the challenge of serving both academics and ministers and how we might foster, and truly be a part of, a less disjointed community.

Facilitating

Lankes explains facilitating as "getting people to the conversation, making sure they know what is being discussed, making sure they feel safe to be part of the conversation, and finding the right encouragement for them to engage in the conversation."[4] More than simply making available books or databases, this "new" facilitation is a dynamic and relational function of librarianship that broadens ideas of what it means to provide access to information. It looks less like a lunch lady shoveling routine fare onto a plate and more like a hostess setting a table for a potluck. Hospitality is the main concern. To be sure, this hospitality can prove to be tricky — you can never be sure what's under the aluminum foil of those casserole dishes initially — but the risk is worth the potential reward of authentic engagement in the community.

The hospitality of library facilitation allows for the distribution and sharing of skills, ideas, services, and resources. Lankes says that "true facilitation means shared ownership," and it's up to "new" librarians to explore the possibilities of how to embody this sharing in (and around, and because of) the library. The first example that comes to mind of new modes of facilitation and access is the move toward open access in scholarly communications. With the federal open access mandate in 2013,[5] and similar institution-level mandates enacted by research universities over the last several years, librarians have had the opportunity to work with faculty in responding and making research more widely available to communities — both local and global — through development and use of, education concerning, and publishing in OA journals and institutional repositories. Certainly great strides have been taken toward increased open access to information, and momentum is building. But the humanities — theology[6] in particular — tend to lag behind. This is one way in which, given theological librarians' dual position in the field of librarianship as well as that of theology, librarians can integrate emerging technologies and practices from the former into the latter. Facilitation may also look like instruction — conventional bibliographic instruction, research methods sessions, or more integrated collaboration with faculty, like embedded classroom work. It may take the form of serving on committees with faculty, attending meetings, or simply showing up at school events. This work of translation and including faculty in the broader discussions of, for example, scholarly communications is the facilitating function of librarians.

Motivation and encouragement are also part of facilitation. Members of the library community may not initially be forthcoming with their participation and sharing. Anxiety, confusion, and even fear of libraries are real and common. This is where the quality of relationships can make a big difference. I'll return to the importance of relationship, and ultimately I'd propose a more focused model, derivative of Lankes's New Librarianship — an embedded model I call Relational Librarianship. It's only in legitimate relationship that encouragement can be sincere and valuable, and it's only in legitimate relationship that facilitation and knowledge-sharing can occur. A glib "Searching the catalog is easy!" to a roomful of unengaged students is not relationship, and is not effective. But when we genuinely know the people in our communities, when we know their projects and their interests and their skills, we can equip them with the resources they truly require, as well as include them in relevant projects and solicit their input and exploit their expertise in various education initiatives.

Conversely, we may expect community members to ask librarians to be involved in their projects, even in ways that may be outside the "traditional" purview of the library. And here is the challenge: when presented with such an opportunity to be engaged in our community, do we refuse, or do we adapt and accept? New Librarianship suggests — perhaps even demands — that we adopt the latter approach.

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[4] Lankes, *The Atlas of New Librarianship*, 65.

[5] http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/microsites/ostp/ostp_public_access_memo_2013.pdf

[6] I should point out that "theology" here is used as poor and un-nuanced shorthand for the variety of subjects we deal with — religious and biblical studies, philosophy, etc. — many of which are decidedly *not* theology.

Knowledge Creation

At the simplest level, whether via research or instruction, higher education is about creating knowledge. Lankes couches his definition and explication of knowledge creation within conversation theory, wherein a conversation takes place when "two parties are actively going back and forth in an engaged manner and language is being exchanged."[7] This conversation is the context where knowledge is created. Two things are worth bearing in mind here: first, that there are *two* engaged parties "going back and forth." It's not a one-way transaction. Both sides have something to offer and something to receive. This conversation occurs within a *relationship*. Second, this conversation hinges on language. And for the sake of effective conversation, it's important to stress that this language is shared. In another book, *Expect More*, Lankes urges library users to "expect your librarian to speak your language, and the librarian should expect you to respect that doing so is valuable work."[8] This is another instance in which the theological librarian's subject-specific knowledge and experience are invaluable. If we are truly members of the community we serve — ministers, religious scholars, both — we will be fluent in the language of that community. We will not appear as willing (though perhaps ignorant) outsiders, but as partners and co-members.

Therefore, when we're speaking the same language as our community, and engaging with it in a fruitful dialog, what constitutes "knowledge creation"? And what are librarians' roles in it?

Naturally, "knowledge artifacts" such as journal articles or monographs published by our faculty, and how we might support their research, writing, and publication, come to mind. This may involve typical modes of support like resource finding or purchasing, but it could also be things like copyright consultation, citation proofing, or simply providing a sounding board for ideas. The ministers we serve may also be publishing; they're certainly writing sermons and liturgies. In what ways might librarians provide support and inspiration in these endeavors? The adaptability demanded by New Librarianship requires that librarians be open to a panoply of possible needs, open to surprises, and open to learning the skills our communities might call for.

We may also think of scholarly communications — the way we disseminate academic knowledge created within our institutions and bring knowledge created elsewhere into the fold of our own communities — both of them, as integral to the work of conversation. Librarians should be advocates of getting our communities' work out into the larger world, whether by aiding in the publication process, sharing our colleagues' recent scholarship via social media, or simply sharing with other librarians what our communities are up to. Simultaneously, we can contribute by keeping our ears to the ground on behalf of our communities, listening for things that would be of interest or benefit to their projects.

Finally, I'm interested in collaboration — the kind where the library plays an *authentic part* — in the knowledge creation in our institutions, not just a tangential source of aid (or worse, a completely ignored one). Librarians can play a valuable role in all the aspects of knowledge creation, all the different kinds of conversations that occur in our communities — writing, instruction, and even informal (yet formative) interactions and discussions. Because of our subject knowledge, I suggest that theological librarians are especially well positioned for genuine collaboration on projects and teaching initiatives. And this can only be enhanced further by our direct engagement in our communities, our forming of relationships with our users.

Communities

The notion of community as the linchpin of the entire model has been evident throughout this essay, but it's so important that it deserves to be directly addressed. Librarians' participation in our particular communities via authentic relationships with fellow members is the best strategy for knowing our users' needs, and making a useful contribution to their work.

"Community" is not a monolith, but an interwoven web of discrete relationships comprised of real individuals. This is especially true in the theological libraries that serve both theoreticians and practitioners. To be a New Librarian in such a setting is to build as many of these relationships with the individuals in our institutions as possible. Lankes quotes librarian Jessamyn West saying, "When people have an information need, they'll always ask people they know before

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[7] Lankes, *The Atlas of New Librarianship*, 221.

[8] R. David Lankes, *Expect More* (Jamesville, NY: Riland Publishing, 2012), 95.

they ask a librarian. The trick is making sure that librarians are some of the people they know."[9] I often tell stories of when my friends, who are students and faculty at institutions other than my own, have e-mailed me asking for research help, or reading lists, or how to find resources on *their* library's website. Surely they have competent, friendly librarians of their own, but since they *know me*, I'm their first choice. Additionally, since they know *me*, as a person, not just "as a librarian," they know my interests, abilities, and skills. They know I can help them. They know they can trust me and that I speak their language. All these aspects coalesce to lessen the anxiety of asking for help, meaning people will actually do so. Building real relationships is not easy, of course. Like setting the table for the potluck, there is some real risk involved. What if no one comes? What if they don't like us? But these are the real risks of a real life of encountering real people, and they can't be programmed or professionalized away. New Librarianship confronts and engages such challenges with a kind of Tillichian courage. The alternative is something close to the despair of pending obsolescence, characteristic of trying to face new challenges with old methods.

When we librarians know — truly know — our users, we can truly be present to them, truly listen to them, and truly understand their information and research needs. And conversely, when they know us, they can understand what we can do for them. In the lower-anxiety context of relationship, there is a freer flow of conversation (as discussed above) and therefore more effective facilitation of knowledge creation.

Lankes talks about understanding user needs in terms of Mike Eisenberg's "Anti-Field of Dreams Model": "Rather than build it and they will come, it is invite them in and then scramble like hell to meet the needs they bring."[10] Too often, librarians expect users to have certain needs that line up neatly with librarians' skills, sometimes even *shaping* their needs into what's expected. But what if, instead, we genuinely got to *know* our users, their projects, their assignments, and then shaped our *skills* to better serve our communities? Perhaps we'd even be able to anticipate needs, because we are *part* of the community rather than simply peripheral.

This involvement requires action. Librarians, introverts though many may be, must go to where our communities are (which is not necessarily within the library spaces) and insert ourselves into their conversations. Initially, that may mean showing up uninvited, but in the spirit of the potluck, we can be sure to bring an offering of our own. In my case, that has taken shape in initiatives such as presenting at theological conferences, engaging students and ministers on Facebook, or attending department functions — showing up so as at least to be recognized as "that girl from the library." Simply being present may seem like a small thing, but it makes a difference.

Conclusions

The theological library is a growing organism,[11] and theological librarianship would do well to grow alongside it, as it ultimately cannot be contained or controlled. Perhaps none of this ("New Librarianship") is altogether *new*, yet it may be time to focus anew on the importance of truly engaging our communities, considering our role in knowledge creation, and learning how to facilitate better learning among the scholars and clergy we serve. At the heart of this focus is an openness to the possibilities and particulars of our individual communities. To discover and explore these particulars we must get out into our communities and build and nurture relationships with people. Perhaps we should start with a potluck.

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[9] Lankes, *The Atlas of New Librarianship*, 83.

[10] Lankes, *The Atlas of New Librarianship*, 83.

[11] S.R. Ranganathan, *The Five Laws of Library Science* (London: Edward Goldston, 1931).