MORAL CRISIS, PRAGMATISM, AND THE LESSONS OF THE LIBRARY WAR EFFORT

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Introduction

Between 1917 and 1920, the American Library Association operated the Library War Service. This was a program designed to serve the reading and information needs of soldiers in training camps or deployed overseas. It also provided an opportunity for librarians to improve the perception of their profession and to develop a broader demographic of library users, particularly adult men. In the process of accomplishing these goals, rank and file librarians across the nation engaged in acts of censorship against German cultural material, denied library access to pacifist organizations, and distributed pro-government propaganda. Arriving at the end of the progressive era of librarianship, World War I gave American librarians a new sense of purpose. The war was a call to action and a chance to prove once and for all how valuable librarians and library collections were to the American people. The nature of librarians’ response to that call was logistically impressive, unethical by current standards, organizationally transformative, and it revealed a deep chauvinism against feminized professions held both within and outside of librarianship. The actions undertaken by librarians as part of the Library War Service represent one of the greatest moral crises in the history of American librarianship. Understanding why this crisis occurred is essential for preventing a repeat occurrence in the future.

What constitutes a moral crisis? How does a moral crisis differ from other kinds of crisis and from normal change? A crisis may be considered as a span of time when events drive the pace of choices but do not dictate the choices that are made. As a result, crises act as stress tests, wherein the strengths and weaknesses of a system are demonstrated in greater contrast than would be seen in times of normal change. This is true for moral crises as well as for broader structural crises. For the purposes of this paper, a moral crisis is an event in the history of a person or an organization that is brought on by the realization that actions and self-identity no longer coincide, revealing
something significant about the character of that person or organization. Resolving a moral crisis requires meaningful individual introspection or collective discourse and either a revision of identity or behaviour. This kind of crisis differs from broader social, political, or economic crises, where institutional power structures are pressured by internal or external events to either adapt or be replaced with a more responsive structure. These kinds of crises may act as the trigger for a moral crisis, in the way that World War I created the justification for the establishment of the Library War Service. However, whereas a standard crisis is resolved when either pressure to reform is removed or when structural changes are implemented, a moral crisis may not be resolved until years after the end of the events of the crisis. What matters in a moral crisis is the ability to honestly appraise individual or professional character as being morally good. Such appraisal can only occur after the kind of introspection or discourse mentioned above. Both kinds of crisis differ from normal change. Normal change occurs gradually and as a result of decisions that are made using existing, relatively unchallenged organizational paradigms. Risks incurred during normal change may be considered operational rather than existential in nature; operational risks are a matter of increased or decreased efficiency. In contrast, an existential risk is an event that is capable of radically and permanently altering an individual or organization, potentially leading to the demise of the institution in question.

The events of the Library War Service qualify as a moral crisis in that the increasingly progressive identity of the library profession was at odds with actions being taken at every level of practice. During the brief years of American involvement in World War I, librarians collectively chose to transform themselves into a profession that took loyalty oaths, censored German culture, gathered intelligence for the army, spread propaganda, and harassed individuals and organizations involved in anti-war efforts. Each of these choices was an effort to improve the perceived status of librarians, revealing a deep insecurity among practitioners regarding the worth of the profession, as well as a willingness to compromise certain emerging values in the hopes of increasing that worth. The primary contribution made by this paper is to establish that the events surrounding the Library War Service constituted a moral crisis, the resolution of which significantly influenced the identity of professional librarianship in the United States. That these events involved a moral crisis reveals why it is important for the profession to resolve any ongoing insecurity about professional worth that could lead to future moral
To make sense of the insecurity that moved leaders of the library profession to seek new purpose through wartime mobilization, it is useful to understand how radically the identity of librarianship had changed in the quarter century preceding the war.

The Progressive Era in Librarianship

The progressive era in the history of librarianship spanned the latter two decades of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth century. It marked a generational transition in national leadership and corresponded with a change in the stated values of the library profession. This era also marked the beginnings of some of the library profession’s lasting paradoxes. A key example of this period’s value shifts was a reversal of the “moral uplift” policy. According to the uplift policy, one of a librarian’s signature duties was to engage in efforts to raise the moral standards of the users of his or her library. Dee Garrison (2003, 68–69), notes that under the “uplift doctrine,” the purpose of bringing reading to the masses was an attempt to elevate the general culture of the nation and to make citizens fit to engage in participatory democracy. By the end of the progressive era, there was a gradual shift towards one of librarianship’s contemporary values: that users should have the freedom to read autonomously and without being judged by library employees. This shift in values represents a significant swing in identity from the librarian as authority figure to the librarian as a member of a service profession. In fact, this shift to user choice and autonomy extended even to the circulation of so-called “pernicious readings.” As Garrison points out (1976, 84), these stories often featured women as protagonists in stories of adventure or intrigue, and were widely circulated among unmarried women in the late nineteenth century. This newly accommodating policy conflicted with the aims of cultural authorities, mostly from the middle class, who still considered unmarried women to be a protected class of person in whose “virtue” and domesticity much was invested. As this generation of late nineteenth-century “new women” readers matured, many found employment in libraries, contributing to the feminization of the library profession (Eddy 2001, 157). As Wiegand points out (1989, 103), economics was behind the feminization of the library profession; qualified women could be paid significantly less than their male counterparts and were

1 The historical context of this paper is that of a moral crisis in American librarianship, and the lessons that may be learned from that crisis can only be directly applied to libraries in the United States. However, the emphasis on trusting the unity of action and identity that results from the successful resolution of moral crises is generalizable to the professional organizations and traditions of librarians from other nations.
seldom promoted to director positions. Being a feminized profession in a society that devalued both the contributions and the capabilities of women made the direct control over social reform impractical. Policies of direct control such as the “uplift doctrine” had encouraged librarians to make use of their authority as experts to elicit change in their communities. After the circulation reforms, librarians relied on their skill in developing the kinds of collections users actually wanted in order to encourage library use. According to Buschman (2007, 1,484), neither the authority nor servant groups went on to develop a full theory of the role of librarians in promoting democracy during the progressive era.

This period also saw significant changes in architectural and circulation policies. Architecturally, the progressive age marked the introduction of Carnegie libraries. Bobinski (1968, 1,361) notes that philanthropist Andrew Carnegie and his foundation were responsible for the creation of 1,679 community public libraries. Many of these community libraries went from sharing space in dual-use facilities to being housed in large, beautifully designed structures. Beyond using grand architecture to make the public library a focal point in communities, all but the earliest Carnegie libraries were designed to have open user access to library stacks. Open access to stacks facilitated browsing for material rather than relying on librarian mediation and made for greater privacy when reading on-site. While opening stacks might seem like an intuitive idea today, giving users direct access to expensive collections was a gesture of trust in the integrity of users. While trusting users was a forward-thinking policy, it was also a pragmatic labour-saving alternative to mediation by librarians. Carl A. Hanson (1994, 159) provides an account of how library reform pioneer John Cotton Dana pushed to make open stacks the standard beyond the Carnegie libraries, changing the way people used library collections for much of the twentieth century. The movement to open the stacks also coincided with other efforts to promote library use for pleasure among urban labourers, immigrants, women, and children. For example, collection policies that had privileged high-culture reading materials changed in the progressive era to include mass-market fiction and periodicals that were in far more demand. On initial examination, these reversals might appear to be motivated by changes in values, but they were also exercises in the pragmatic need to justify public investment in community libraries. To point out the pragmatism behind these policy changes is not a judgment against the library profession. Instead, it is a recognition that a strain of pragmatism runs through a series of policy reversals that are often characterized as progressive in spirit.

These shifts in policy and the process of feminizing the profession transformed the public’s image of librarians as being “apostles of culture” to
being “tender technicians” in the words of Dee Garrison, or “handmaidens of the learned world,” as Jesse Shera notes (1931, 21). Over the span of a single generation, the perception of public libraries and librarians was radically altered. One of the enduring paradoxes of these reforms is that they upheld the status quo even as they appeared to represent progressive political, social, and cultural ideas. Some historians of the profession argue that reforms were motivated by a desire to maintain the stability of society and the hegemonic influence of elites, rather than liberate access to literature and information. Advocates for this “critical revisionist” position include Michael Harris (1973, 2,509), whose essay, “The Purpose of the American Public Library: A Revisionist Interpretation of History,” started a heated debate among library practitioners and educators about the nature and motivations of library reform. Christine Pawley’s article (1998, 123), “Hegemony’s Handmaid?” criticized what she identified as an ongoing tendency of library and information science graduate school programs to disproportionately teach students to support the interests of the dominant culture in contrast with the progressive language used to convey the profession’s mission. What makes this a paradox is that elements of both positions—library as tool for hegemony and library as instrument of liberation—are both plausible and should be considered ongoing issues that have yet to be explicitly reconciled in regards to how libraries function in culture and society.

Understanding how these two guiding impulses, to liberate and to control, are reconciled reveals something important about the function and identity of American librarianship and explains why the call to arms in World War I was so well received. Garrison (2003, 219) captures the enthusiasm of the American Library Association’s engagement in the war effort in a quote by librarian, Burton E. Stevenson. Stevenson declared that before World War I, the ALA was “merely a humdrum professional organization, wrapped round with tradition, settled in its habits of thought…. Its members were quiet, inoffensive, well-behaved people, cherishing the same hobby.” This dismissive characterization paints an image of the profession as meek, domesticated, and irrelevant. It is impossible to know if this characterization was widely accepted, but in October 1917, librarians made the most of their opportunity to craft a new image for themselves when Librarian of Congress, Herbert Putnam, assumed responsibility for the program known as the Library War Service.

The Library War Service

The Library War Service was both a fundraising campaign and a distribution network designed to bring reading materials to American soldiers participating
in World War I. Garrison argues that one of the reasons why library leaders were so keen on participating in the Library War Service was that it gave the leaders, who were predominately male, a chance to serve a male readership instead of serving the primarily female readership of the public library. Garrison further argues that the campaign was not just about working for men, but rather, about increasing the standing of the profession; serving the needs of men, especially men conducting a war, was deemed more important than serving the needs of women (219). This is clearly problematic, and yet it reveals something about how at least the library leadership viewed the effect of having a feminized professional work force. If the work of men was more important that the work of women, then librarianship must be less important than other, traditionally masculine-gendered work. When leaders had a chance to “re-masculinize” the profession, even by association, it was too opportunity for them to ignore. Beyond providing a chance to increase prestige by being associated with the supposed work of men, serving the fighting force also meant that librarians were being patriotic, serving the most crucial interests of their nation. The results of the Library War Effort were two-fold. First, the campaign cemented the impression that librarians were part of a nationwide profession and therefore capable of significant coordinated action. Second, it demonstrated that librarianship could collectively respond to interests, national or otherwise. What librarianship collectively chose to do, in order to support the interests of the United States, was to once again assume the duty of institutional censor. This time, instead of engaging in uplift, librarians engaged in practices that restricted access to any materials that might support the nation’s enemy or the enemy’s culture.

An Active Instrument for Propaganda

The key study of American librarians’ efforts to support World War I is Wayne Wiegand’s 1989 monograph, An Active Instrument for Propaganda: The American Public Library During World War I. Wiegand describes the war as a watershed event in the history of American librarianship. He shows that prior to World War I, librarianship was a profession that presided over an unsettled domain. Librarians could neither dictate what people read, nor could they rely on traditional nineteenth-century sources of intellectual authority to justify the worth of their collections (1989, 3). Wiegand gives an account of a small, widely distributed profession eager to be relevant but anxious that an established canon no longer existed to ensure that the best books would be selected. When the Library War Service emerged as something that seemed so clearly worthwhile, librarians seized the opportunity to transcend their uncertain condition (4–5). The problem with transcending uncertainty is that doing so often requires accepting a worldview of reduced complexity. Once the
United States entered the war, librarians began to reflect upon their collections with the national spirit of intolerance, not just for pro-German material, but also for any reading material that was not in absolute conformity with the war effort (6).

Extremism propagated easily amid fears of German spies. Extremism also made it easier to commit injustices against German Americans and to suppress their civic groups and periodicals (88–89). Freedom of the press was abridged for German language newspapers and a Committee for Public Information (CPI) was placed in charge of getting out a positive message about the value of participating in the war effort. Public libraries were an important tool for the CPI in the distribution of pro-war propaganda (89). A specific example of this active participation in propaganda can be found in an account of the Cleveland Public Library’s participation in the war effort. Daniel F. Ring (1983, 10), notes the following loyalty oath that staff members were required to take:

I pledge my absolute loyalty, in thought, word and deed, to the United States of America. I pledge myself, personally and as a member of the staff of the Cleveland Public Library, to do all in my power to make the Library an instrument to help the Government in carrying on the war to defeat our enemies, Germany and Austria.

It is impossible to imagine librarians having to take this kind of oath today, which is a sign of just how much values have changed in the intervening decades. According to Ring, in addition to displaying posters and broadsides for war effort programs, librarians were asked to examine German language newspapers and notice anything that could be of strategic value in terms of targets, such as bridges or buildings, and send these to the authorities. They also participated in censorship by removing reading material perceived as being sympathetic to the German cause and by acquiring both pro-soldier reading material and interestingly, the anti-socialist political cartoon, Red Peril (Ring 1983). Everything Ring reports—from the amount of money raised to the dedication of the book drive and the participation in food saving programs—echoes the overviews found in the work of Garrison and Wiegand. Another perspective on participation in the war effort was that of the “women librarians” who staffed the library at Camp Zachary Taylor in Lexington, Kentucky (Daniels 2008, 286). Having women directly serving the reading needs of soldiers as they trained had a significant social impact for women. Not only those particular women, but all female librarians, perceived a boost in their
status, even though their participation was not officially acknowledged in written materials about the camp.

*Resisting the Pressure to Censor*

Thus far, this account of the emergence of librarian nationalism suggests that librarians might have found it impossible to resist the pressure to censor. However, that proved not to be true in at least one case. Wiegand gives an account of how, in the first year of American involvement in World War I, John Cotton Dana, the noted public library advocate and director of the Newark, New Jersey public library (who was mentioned above for his work on normalizing open stacks), opposed an attempt to have materials removed from his collection by a representative of the anti-pacifist writers’ group known as the “Vigilantes.” The representative had found success in having titles that contained what the group claimed was seditious content removed from other public libraries. But Dana refused to give his consent. Dana’s objection was that “liberty of thought is a very desirable thing for the world and that liberty of thought can only be maintained by those who have free access to opinion” (Wiegand 1989b, 96). This view on the freedom to read is entirely consistent with that of librarians working almost a century later. Unfortunately, Dana’s objection was one of the very few that rose to national attention among librarians. Wiegand concludes that the majority of librarians seemed not only to go along with being agents of censorship and propaganda, but also to delight in it for the sense of purpose and status it brought. He asks his readers to refrain from judging librarians of that era too harshly as war hysteria was pervasive (1).

**Results of Librarian War Efforts**

What became of the Library War Service? Writing in 1919, librarian Chalmers Hadley (1919, 110–111) made clear that it was widely recognized how participating in the war effort fundamentally changed librarianship:

> It seems unnecessary to speak at greater length of the library war service and what it has done. How it has given the American Library Association a new and enlarged vision of usefulness and service such as it never had before, need not be dwelt on, since all of us realize this. The A.L.A. has put its hand to the plow and cannot look back.

Beyond this enlarged vision of usefulness, Garrison claims, the war effort changed the way women sought active participation in library leadership. She
gives particular credit to Beatrice Winser (a colleague of Dana’s at the Newark Public Library). In 1918, Winser pressed Librarian of Congress Putnam for more representation from women in camp libraries and at the Library War Service headquarters (Garrison 2003, 221). After the war ended, the momentum librarianship experienced failed to continue into the so-called “Enlarged Program.” That program was intended to centralize librarianship around the ALA, to establish new standards for adult services, and to standardize education for librarianship with a certificate program (Young 1980, 196–197). The process collapsed due to differing visions of the program, resistance from the Special Library Association, and a lack of ready funds for the effort (202). According to Garrison (2003, 224), after 1920, librarianship returned to its traditional role, providing a “generalist collection of books, chiefly fiction, read by middle class patrons, chiefly women.”

What ultimately changed was not the power, status, or mission of librarians, but rather, their awareness of the ethical significance of censorship and the value of intellectual freedom as a result of years of introspection and discourse about how to resolve the moral crisis brought on by participation in the Library War Service. In the ALA’s Intellectual Freedom Manual, Judith F. Krug stresses that freedom to read and intellectual freedom have not always been core values for the library profession (Krug 2006, 14). The significance of the two values to the profession had to be learned, and experience is often the most influential teacher. Only the almost universal failure of librarians during World War I to defend the freedom of individuals to read the material of their choosing provided the experience by which to judge the censoring materials for service to state. That moral awareness began to emerge in the late 1930s. The “Library’s Bill of Rights,” a document that preceded the current “Library Bill of Rights,” was adopted in 1939. These and subsequent statements of ethics and values were an effort to guide behaviour toward better compliance with the new professional identity.

Conclusions
What lessons can librarians and their supporters learn from the war service crisis? Seventy-five years later, in the early twenty-first century, librarians are at the forefront of collective efforts to protect intellectual freedom, the freedom to read, and the right to privacy. Indeed, dedication to these personal freedoms is often held up as being amongst the most significant parts of librarianship’s ethical identity. This seems like an unexpected trajectory—from the librarian as active censor and instrument of propaganda to the librarian as leading advocate
of autonomy and tolerance. If read directly, the trajectory suggests that following the mistakes made during the war effort, librarianship made a simple commitment to the progressive ideals of the late nineteenth century. This account of continuous moral progress is a compelling narrative of the “goodness” of the profession. However, resolutions of moral crises are rarely so simple. An alternate account of the transition from active censors to defenders of intellectual freedom begins with the premise that the existence of libraries in society, particularly public libraries, is not guaranteed and must instead be justified. If that premise is true, then each generation of librarians must find the best social, political, and economic argument for ensuring the continued existence of libraries in light of their circumstances.

From this pragmatic perspective, the lesson learned from the war effort crisis is this: while direct power rests in the hands of the people with their ability to use the library or not, and it rests in the hands of cultural and economic elites with their ability to fund the library or not, it does not rest in the hands of library professionals. This is the same realization that began the progressive movement in librarianship. Uplift does not work because uplift cannot be mandated.

Moral censorship cannot be enforced because there are other sources for entertainment and education. Censorship of art and culture for the sake of national defence cannot be mandated because the fear necessary to justify it does not exist outside of a situation wherein a nation is engaged in total war. Contemporary circumstances have dictated that the progressive approach is one that is most likely to maintain the status and presence of public libraries in American society, and American librarians have become very good at employing that approach. This method involves giving the public close to unfettered access to the information it wants, in the format it wants, when it wants it, while protecting people from any institution that would attempt to exercise undue power over their access to information. That dedication to access is coupled with the belief that greater access to information and broader choice in media consumption is a benefit to society.

This view from the perspective of pragmatism in no way disputes the validity of the ethical codes that American library professionals struggled to craft. They are strong codes, negotiated and adopted in good faith. They protect both essential eighteenth-century liberal values and hard won nineteenth-century progressive advances. Instead, this view simply acknowledges that alongside the vein of professional idealism that runs through librarianship there is another vein of pragmatism that runs just as deeply. The primary lesson to be learned from reviewing the Library War Effort crisis is that the current
A significant factor that can contribute to making the kinds of harmful decisions seen during the Library War Service is the lack of respect for the worth of the profession. Seeking to radically reframe the purpose, uses, and intellectual domain of the library profession in an attempt to acquire more status, particularly by embracing the values and approaches of more traditionally “masculinized” domains, runs the risk of minimizing the profession’s ability to justify its existence as being distinct from those other disciplines. This is the case, particularly if librarianship is unable consistently to bring in grant money or patents in numbers that are comparable to Computer Science or Engineering. The risk is that public libraries could become a specific not-for-profit use case for software solutions, instead of the product of an adaptable profession that is driven to act in accord with the hard-won lessons learned through moral crises. As contemporary librarians make decisions about the path that will best ensure the long-term continuation of libraries and all the good for which they have come to stand, it is important to remember the Library War Service, and to be aware of the tendency to seek legitimacy outside of the identity and character of the profession, and to resist the urge to submit to it.
References


