Librarians, professionalism and image: stereotype and reality

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Abstract
Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to consider the professional role of the librarian, examining the images of presented by professional literature, mass media and popular culture.
Design/methodology/approach – The historical development of the library professional is considered. Conceptions of librarians in professional literature, mass media and popular culture are examined. The ongoing dialogue upon the nature of the professional role within the professional press and email discussion lists is also discussed.
Findings – Images of librarians within mass media and culture are often positive and heroic whereas images within professional literature tend to reinforce stereotypes.
Originality/value – An examination of the professional role of the librarian, particularly in the UK, considering images and content from the mass media, popular culture and professional literature.
Keywords Librarianship, Individual perception, Librarianship history
Paper type Viewpoint

Introduction
The professional image and the self-image of librarians are influenced by representations in the media and images in the general public's imagination. This article examines the influence of these forces upon ideas of professionalism in librarianship, considering the often competing voices that shape our sense of the professional role.

First, the historical development of the idea of a professional role is outlined, to indicate the background to the contemporary situation. The reality of the stereotype of a librarian is investigated, and media and public perceptions are examined. The image of the librarian within popular culture, often heroic and far from stereotypical is illustrated as distant to the profession's own self-image. The current context of changing professional roles can contribute to personal insecurity and the implications of these changes are discussed. Finally, possible directions and propositions for the future of the profession are presented.

The professional role is examined throughout via the lens of the public library as it is the professionals of this sector that form the popular image of the librarian for a majority of people. This is not intended to be exclusive, and many of the issues discussed can be applied across types of library, however the image of the public librarian is considered to be key as it is the public library which is most widely accessible to the populace at large.

The first librarians: historical background
It was the Public Libraries Act of 1850 that began the history of modern public librarianship. The numbers of public libraries rapidly increased as the 19th became the 20th century; in 1911, 58 per cent of the population was served by a public library and by 1915 there were 375 public libraries across England and Wales (Adams in Smith, 2006, p. 18). One of the key reasons for the establishment of public libraries was for the self-betterment of the working classes, yet the first male librarians often had left formal education themselves at 13 or 14 and the low status of female colleagues (despite being
better educated), both contributed to the profession as a whole being seen as one of low status (Smith, 2006, p. 54).

The skills needed to practice librarianship were disputed from the very beginning of the formation of the Library Association in 1877, which was a non-qualifying association at inception. There was no requirement for a formal qualification and professional views expressed at the time reflect librarians’ perception of the popular opinion, and frequently advocate a higher status, and larger wage-packet:

The same old ignorant idea...that librarianship is a mere elementary kind of labourer’s job, requiring nothing more scientific than the physical ability to hand a book over the counter, for which a contemptibly small wage is more than enough (The Library World, 1910/11 in Smith, 2006, p. 55).

The skills set of librarians was stressed as something that distinguished them from “mere...labourers”:

Present-day librarians are almost universally trained men; energetic and capable of using for the benefit of readers, whatever knowledge they may possess (Green, 1903/04 in Smith, 2006, p. 55).

Admittance to the profession for boys was at the age of 13 or 14 after an elementary school education; for women at 17, after a high school education and in some cases a degree (Smith, 2006, p. 62). The need to continue this education was recognised:

A board school education is not enough for anyone who aspires to be something better than an automatic machine for issuing and indicating books... (Roberts, 1901/03 in Smith, 2006, p. 62).

Some library authorities chose to further their employees’ education through internal schemes, and the Library Association introduced professional certificates in 1880. These, however, provided no guarantee of an improvement in conditions of employment:

The Library Association certificates could not guarantee a reasonable salary, the library establishment had sought to raise the status of the profession by creating intellectual and technical hurdles, which new entrants had to pass, but the rewards remained poor, and attracting the truly able remained difficult (Smith, 2006, p. 67).

The issues facing library professionals at the turn of the century reflect similar fears to those a century later, specifically the struggle to gain recognition for the skills required. A membership survey conducted by CILIP in 2006 quotes the following answer, one of many similar responses, to the question “What one thing could CILIP do to improve your professional standing?”:

Put more effort into fighting for better salaries comparable with other professions. The fact that we are paid so little makes us look to be of little worth compared to other professionals that work in local government and beyond (Creaser, 2007, p. 125).

The quest for professional status has been an area of insecurity since the beginnings of the modern profession, particularly for those relying on local authorities for remuneration. Professional literature from the turn of the century reflects these concerns, and acts to illustrate the familiarity of the contemporary situation.
The stereotype and the reality: contemporary public and media perceptions

The librarian stereotype is an older, single, white woman, generally accoutered with one or more of the following: cardigan, pearls, tweed skirt, hair in a bun and spectacles perched on the nose. The majority of librarians are older white women, so some aspects of the stereotype are not, one would think, hugely unrepresentative. The professions’ complicity is keeping this image valid is certainly relevant, both through a lack of workforce diversification and a certain sensitivity over self-image.

Examinations of the media’s presentation of librarians reveal a considerable variance from this stereotype. A content analysis of the Australian print media over a period of four years from 2000 to 2004 revealed for example that the majority of reporting was positive. The profession was praised for being innovative and future-focused, dedicated, enthusiastic, knowledgeable and organised (Robinson, 2006, pp. 10-11). The clichéd images that Robinson had set out to search for were found not in the mass media, but did exist in professional literature:

The clichéd images found in the [professional] literature review did match the statistics of the typical practitioner: a middle-aged female working in a public library. In contrast...many [print media] stories concerned younger and male information professionals (Robinson, 2006, p. 11).

This evidences the complicity of the profession in perpetuating the stereotype themselves, and also raises the issue of gender and professional representation. A study of the portrayal of librarians in obituaries in the New York Times found that in a profession dominated by women the majority of obituaries, 63.4 per cent, were of men and disproportionately from the academic sector. The traits most commonly praised within the obituaries included collection building, scholarship, international outreach and helpfulness, and the profession is portrayed as a glamorous one “offers individuals a fulfilling, exciting, worldly, and eventful career” (Dilevko and Gottlieb, 2004, p. 174).

These studies of the print media suggest that the media portrayal does not necessarily conform to a stereotype, yet neither are they fully representative of the profession, focusing more on male professionals. Robinson suggests that:

This could be attributed to politicking and power issues, such as a belief that men are considered to be more newsworthy, and it may be an attempt to hide the number of women in the profession, perhaps to attract more male workers (Robinson, 2006, p. 11).

The negative stereotype of a librarian is clearly associated predominantly with women; however, a more positive focus on female practitioners rather than a negation of their presence may be more productive. The “big librarianship” often reported on in the press often eclipses the everyday practice of librarians across the country. It is this “small librarianship”; recommending a good book, reading at story time, efficiently finding the right information, that is often negatively gendered:

There seems to be very little middle space or will to define librarianship in a positive way an amalgam of small and caring acts that, summed together, positively affect the lives of ordinary and marginalized individuals (Dilevko and Gottlieb, 2004, p. 176).

A recent example of an attempt to promote “small librarianship” can be seen in the Love Libraries campaign, intended to engage more people with libraries and led by a refurbishing of three libraries across the country, which attracted significant press attention. This national promotion included a competition for young librarians of the future:
A group of ten passionate, ambitious and inspiring young librarians who are reinventing the nations public library service bringing with them new energy, enthusiasm and spirit to the service (Love Libraries, 2006, online).

This very positive presentation of a younger generation of professionals works to counter the aging stereotype effectively and the list of ten is equally divided by gender.

The issue of the perceptions held by the general public about LIS professionals is not often addressed directly, but may be considered through other means, for example, the footfall and issue statistics of public libraries can give an indicator of the perception of the service, and therefore staff, locally. Research reports often address staff issues within a wider remit. The Reading Agency’s *Fulfilling their potential*, a report into the provision and development of services for young people reported that an unwelcoming attitude towards young people from library staff was a considerable barrier to library use (The Reading Agency, 2004, p. 21).

A recent research study into the use of public libraries by the 14-35 age group indicated both positive and negative perceptions:

I like the idea of advice from the staff in the library...I would trust them...they are knowledgeable.

I imagine an old battleaxe, like the teachers you get in school who don’t take no shit (Define Research and Insight, 2006, p. 29, 39).

While the mass media does not always resort to a stereotypical presentation of a library professional, these reports suggest that the stereotype still exists within the public perception and may act as a powerful deterrent to library use. High profile national promotions of the sector are key, but must be supported by a consistent local standard of service. The MLA and other national organisations working with libraries are crucial and provide through policy and promotional work a core structure for public libraries. The most recent MLA initiative, *A Blueprint for excellence* (Dolan, 2007) continues the sector regeneration initiated with *Framework for the Future* (Department for culture, media and sport, 2003), and aims to standardise the services that the public can expect, yet there can often be a tension in practice between “national agreements” and local delivery.

**Batgirl was a librarian: popular culture’s depiction of librarians**

The images of librarians within popular culture are often distant from both stereotype and reality, and as such provide a useful third perspective for examining the nature of professional image. The infamous negative portrayals of librarians are often older, for example, the film *It’s a wonderful life* made in 1946, which shows the main character, George Bailey, experiencing the horrifying revelation that without him being born his wife Mary, would have been not just a spinster, but employed as a librarian!

As the profession has modernised, characterisations have become somewhat more positive. In the original Batman stories first published by DC Comics in the 1960s, the alter ego of Batgirl was introduced as Dr Barbara Gordon, a PhD in library science who is head of Gotham City Public Library (Highsmith, 2002, p. 77). However, Barbara is unfortunately depicted shelving books, visual shorthand for the librarian despite her supposed status as head of service. The unassuming role of librarian is used as a low-visibility disguise for her crime-fighting alter-ego, and while her information-locating skills may have been useful to her extra-curricular activities no direct examples are given (Highsmith, 2002, p. 79).
A character shown to use his librarian skills to much greater effect is that of Rupert Giles, school librarian in the television series and comic books, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Giles plays a key information role providing the resources and expertise to advise Buffy on the demons she encounters. Although more at ease within the library than in battle with vampires, the character is shown as an inspiring example of a superbly knowledgeable librarian, and his presence is often vital to the success of the plot. In addition, the character achieved an accolade afforded to few real librarians, appearing on the cover of *American Libraries* journal (*American Libraries*, Vol. 30 No. 8).

The recent creation of a librarian action figure doll has provoked large amounts of praise and criticism. A real-life librarian, Nancy Pearl a US librarian, author and broadcaster, was cast in 5 in. moulded plastic, complete with conservative clothes and a shushing action. The figure has attracted condemnation from the profession for conforming to a negative stereotype (Kroll, 2004, p. 21). The appearance of the doll was however based on Pearl and her wardrobe, yet Pearl herself is a very positive example of a dynamic, media-friendly librarian. She appears regularly on local radio to promote libraries and reading, is the author of several book recommendation titles and instigated a citywide reading project in Seattle “If all of Seattle read the same book”, which has been copied worldwide (Kroll, 2004, p. 21).

The image of librarians within popular culture can be problematic, as these examples indicate, often providing a radical and inspiring vision for a modern professional, yet also hobbled by a traditional stereotype. The high visibility of many librarian characters within popular culture does show good awareness levels of many positive aspects of the profession, and provides a good grounding for further sector advocacy and promotion.

**LIS-INSECURE: paranoia and professional self-image**

The self-image of librarians is of frequent interest to the professional press and discussion lists. The perpetuation of a stereotype can be seen more often in professional literature than in the mass media:

> The framing of a typical article (within the mass print media) was found not to demean the profession and therefore did not match either the beliefs documented in the literature or those commonly held within the information professional sphere (Robinson, 2006, p. 11).

A degree of paranoia surrounding self-image can be detected throughout professional debate, whether heated exchanges on email discussion lists, sessions on image at sector conferences or the Media-watching pages of CILIP’s Update journal.

A recent example of this issue in the national press is a useful illustration of the sensitivity surrounding self-image. A librarian wrote to the Guardian newspaper’s Notes and Queries feature with a desperate plea:

> I’m a school librarian and work hard to promote reading and research skills in young people. Like every librarian I’ve met, I try to be friendly and helpful. Yet I struggle to find a positive image of a librarian in any books or in the media generally. We tend to be portrayed as being mean, sad, peculiar and petty-minded. Why? (*The Guardian*, 2006, p. 28).

The replies received from readers ranged from brief and uninspired “Ssssh!” to a lengthy diatribe against library professionals from a seemingly embittered library assistant. The majority of replies contributed positive examples from fiction and reality, including Casanova and the ape librarian in Terry Pratchett novels
This example is clear evidence from within the profession of a paranoia about external perceptions of the job. The Media-watching page of Update charts this on a monthly basis, where eager librarians send in examples from around the world of good or bad portrayals of the profession in the mass media. This serves to reinforce the perceptions of the negative stereotype and even a sense of victimization, although an occasional positive mention of the profession does sometimes appear.

A more useful approach to sensitivity over self-image may be to actively counter the negative portrayals with positive behaviour, a tactic advocated in a lengthy discussion on the LIS-PROFESSION discussion list:

The “image” of a profession is created by people's personal experience of it. It is down to librarians and information professionals at the grass roots level offering excellent service to their users/customers (Ayre, 2003, online).

Such discussion lists often attract heated debate over issues of image, again illustrating the level of feeling within the profession. The belief that the mass media works to persecute the profession has been shown to be unfounded (Robinson, 2006, p. 13), and promotion of the positive aspects of libraries needs to be improved, particularly as it appears within the professional press.

Whose job is it anyway? Changing job titles and changing roles

Although cries of a crisis in the library world are certainly nothing new (Buschman, 2003, p. 3), the recent restructuring within many public library authorities has led to renewed anxiety over the professional role. Many authorities have changed job titles, removing the word librarian, and responsibilities have shifted in many cases from enquiry desk-based work to focusing on engaging new audiences. In addition, some authorities are recruiting those without a library qualification or background to librarian-equivalent posts. Changes of this sort can be perceived as very threatening by some and at the least, unsettling.

The motivations behind such deep cultural change are many, focusing around the need to account for the services impact and local government expenditure. The new opportunities offered in many cases by changing roles can allow for an exciting new breadth to professional practice; however reports from the field suggest that in reality reactions are mixed:

Some SDOs (Service Development Officers) have blossomed and grasped the opportunities to go out and work with communities and develop new audiences for our services. Other colleagues are finding it more difficult to work in a totally new way, freed from the constraints of enquiry desk timetabling and a set pattern of late-nights and Saturdays (Jones, 2005, p. 38).

That some colleagues are unwilling to change and embrace a new “freedom” is the explicit criticism here, and illustrates a negatively traditional notion of the library profession as tethered to the enquiry desk and fearful of change.

There are many examples of positive staff development programmes in the library sector to challenge and engage with new generations of staff from a variety of backgrounds. Some authorities run internal programmes for example Nottinghamshire Libraries’ “Performance through People” programme aimed to develop the leadership skills of new professionals (Edmonds and Owen, 2006, p. 8). Others have specially created posts to develop new entrants to the profession, including West Sussex Libraries who have several Trainee Librarian posts based at their major libraries who benefit from a comprehensive development programme and
are expected to achieve chartered membership of CILIP during their time in position. National programmes, such as the Leading Modern Public Libraries: Future Leaders and the network of events provided by CILIP’s special interest groups across the country provide opportunity for the pro-active professional to continue their development.

The challenges of changing roles and work environments can be unsettling, but it is through an informed engagement with the implications and realities of change upon the professional role that we can shape our future for ourselves.

Take me to your librarian: possible futures

Insecurity over the professional role has existed since the first modern librarians, and the pleas made a century ago for recognition and fair remuneration still resound in professional discourse. An insecurity over status and a sensitivity over self-image has achieved little so far, whilst the perception of persecution by stereotype has been shown to be dated. It is a matter of choosing the positive aspects of cultural influences to inspire us and shouting loud about the good work we all do, both big and small.

The image we seem to worry about most – that of the middle-aged spinster librarian – is basically irrelevant and unimportant. What is important is the view of the librarian and the library as foreboding, boring, complicated, largely inaccessible, or worse, irrelevant (Schuman, 1990, p. 86).

Every professional proud to call themselves a librarian must work daily to counter this view, not alone but in partnership with professional networks and organisations, who in their turn must consistently operate a vibrant and engaged promotional strategy, representing on the national stage the skills and experience of their workforce.

The first librarian in the US Congress, Major Robert Owens, offers this vision of one possible future for librarianship, eloquently capturing the centrality of positive action to the role of librarian:

On more than one occasion I have dreamed that a spaceship from some advanced civilisation on another planet has landed and that the ship’s captain has disembarked uttering the words: ‘Take me to your librarian’. If current developments are carried to their logical conclusion, it will result in the accumulation of powerful, capable persons with the mentality and orientation of librarians. Generalists, people who have mastered the encyclopaedic approach to problem solving, consistently have been the leaders of modern societies (Owens, 1979, p. 3).

Maybe we worry too much about the stereotypes of both how we look and what we do. It is however crucial that people have a clear idea of the range of services we actually offer. To achieve this, what we do must be relevant and in consultation with the communities we serve, consistent across the country and most of all, shouted about, really loudly.

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About the author
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