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Beyond the Oedipus Age: Professionalism and Information

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Abstract:

The history of professionalism in the United States is marked by a mirroring of formal conditions between knowledge and professionalism. Nowhere is this as true as in the university whose professionals possess the power to authorize other professionals. Professionals are characterized by their isolation, authority, and freedom from the traditional constraints of wage labor and exchange value: in turn, these characteristics also describe the kind of pure, "theoretical" knowledge that the professional is assumed to possess.

If, in modernity, these two bodies--that of knowledge and that of professionalism--are assumed to have a mirroring, if not an identical structure, then what are the consequences for professionalism if knowledge is no longer "pure?" This paper suggests that pure knowledge has a problematic structure in the history of library and information studies, within both Dewey's library "economy" and European "documentation." As recent work in critical theory has problematized notions of knowledge and university professionalism, the notion of "professional knowledge" has assumed a less autonomous and more adventurous form toward the end of modernity.

Introduction

The professionalism of librarians and other information workers has long been a source of debate both within and outside of the university. Part of Melvil Dewey's purpose in founding the Columbia School of Library Economy was to bestow professional status upon librarians through the institutional authority of the university. Indeed, particularly during the last third of the nineteenth century in the

United States, previously "practical" fields such as law, medicine, and engineering that had existed outside the domain of the university were professionalized through their institutionalization as graduate studies.

Thus, the professionalism of a practicing field is historically inseparable from the professionalism of university instruction and the institutions of knowledge that define university professionals.

For the past quarter century the nature and legitimacy of the university, its professionals, and their claims to knowledge have been seriously questioned. Though such questions have been most aggressively raised in academic departments whose professionals are engaged in a legacy of "pure research," such as the humanities, a variety of critiques have challenged dominant assumptions of modernist research or "science" in general. These critiques have, generally speaking, challenged notions of autonomy, universality, disinterestedness, representation, and the social neutrality often attributed to method. Various critical projects have sought to redraw the nature and relations of disciplines by utilizing ideas that were once thought of as outside and unrelated to the workings of those disciplines. Because such critiques are grounded in the shifting nature of social praxis, we gain little understanding of them by labeling their procedures in terms of distinct "methods"--or by describing them with labels such as "feminist," "post-structural," "post-colonial," etc. In one way or another, what these critiques have in common is their critical engagement with those elements of modernist science which have traditionally argued that disciplines and their professionals lie beyond social determinations and other "exteriorities" to disciplinary truth. Consequently, the term "postmodernist" is useful in referring to a group of critiques that have a self-critical relation to their own disciplinary certainty within modernist science.

This paper examines assumptions about knowledge, professionalism, and professionals that have come down to us from the nineteenth century, and then asks how these assumptions might be changed by the shifting importance of information in our age. How does "information" as a form of knowledge that is not modernist, but necessarily, post-modernist, reposition professionalism particularly within the university? Further, library and information studies (LIS) may be a particularly interesting place to explore the relationship between information and professionalism because not only has the field, as a "professional field" within the university, always had a strained relation to "pure knowledge," but the history of LIS seems to suggest that within that field knowledge has always been something more than pure, always something more than modernist science. So what kind of knowledge is this if it is "something more" (or perhaps we should say "something less") than modernist knowledge? And how--and where--does this "something" reposition the professional in an age when information is increasingly important?

Professionalism and the University

In his valuable essay "The Vaulted Eye: Remarks on Knowledge and Professionalism," Samuel Weber articulates several key characteristics of professionalism as granted by the authority of the university (1). Citing Bledstein(2), Weber notes that, first of all, "modern professionalism presupposes the systematic codification of a body of knowledge held to be relatively autonomous and self-contained." Such a body is the basis for a field and a practice. It claims universality and, also, a certain degree of disinterestedness in regard to the normal mechanisms of social production and interaction, including use-value for production and exchange relations for labor(3). Disinterestedness, additionally, pertains to the products of the professional's work as they are said to be made available, first of all, for the general social good. More importantly, though, disinterestedness refers to the sources of the professional's materials and motives. The professional, as the authority in a field, is said to act autonomously with materials more or less of his or her own choosing, rather than being forced or coerced to act by forces outside of his or her professional competency.

Nowhere are such qualities more fully proclaimed than in university professionalism at the faculty level. Indeed, today, the authority for almost all non-trade professionals issues from the authority of the university and its faculty. The university authorizes authority, and is thus the chief authority in the world of knowledge. For this reason fields attempt to establish themselves within the university in order to grant their members economic and social status.

The university, as its name implies, presents itself as a large-scale institution whose authority stretches across the entire natural and social world. The university is universal in its authority over knowledge, and, through knowledge, over nature. And since its authority begins with thought, the university, as we all know from commencement addresses, is organized primarily around the "life of the mind," in particular, the mind of science, the rational mind. As Derrida noted in his 1983 Cornell address, "The Principle of Reason: The University in the Eyes of Its Pupils," these qualities constitute the essence of the university--that is, the university's grounding in the principle of reason.

Derrida's claim that the university is founded upon the principle of reason has, of course, strong historical support. Though it has been subject to a variety of misinterpretations and native influences, the authority of the American university, as Laurence Veysey notes, was, and is still, firmly grounded in a transplantation of the nineteenth century German university. To be specific, the modern university has its roots in the founding of the University of Berlin in 1810 under the influence of Wilhelm von Humboldt. In his 1810 text, "On the inner and outer organization of higher research institutions in Berlin," Humboldt suggests that the university has the social function of building a nation and a culture (Bildung) out of truth(4). This would be accomplished by supporting research in service to the state, though not under the direction of the state. For Humboldt, autonomy for research was necessary in order to ensure that the knowledge attained be pure and true, rather

than determined by the short term needs of the state. Simply put, the university would deduce the true form of all things--"to approximate all things to their ideal" ("ferner Alles einem Ideal zuzubilden")--and then combine such forms or fields within a single idea or system of the true.⁵ The university would, in speculative parlance, reflect the life of the mind (Geist) in its totality as thought and as rational matter--that is, the university would be the idea of the principle of reason for the universe as a whole.

To accomplish this lofty goal of science (Wissenschaft), Humboldt proposed reforms to the university that remain to this day. Foremost is Humboldt's insistence on the importance of research. "Research" was to be not only a function of science (i.e., the seeking of true principles for the universe as a whole), but research was also to direct the process of teaching so students would work directly under the research professor in the discovery of truth. Humboldt's most important contribution in elevating research within the university was his argument that pure knowledge could only be produced if research and the researcher existed in "isolation and freedom" ("Einsamkeit und Freiheit")⁽⁶⁾. These formal conditions for production were necessary because truth or "pure knowledge" also had this structure. Knowledge was true unto itself and not predicated by short-term influences. The researcher and pure knowledge were united in the practice of science, which sought and represented the principle of reason in general universal law. The researcher and pure knowledge mirrored one another, or psychologically, could be said to be identical to one another in their formal conditions of "isolation and freedom."

Although Humboldt's notions of "isolation and freedom" were later to be expressed within the American university in terms of academic freedom, in German universities (and arguably within the American context as well) Humboldt's notions also carried with them epistemological claims as to the autonomy and the essential disinterestedness of the researcher's practice and knowledge ⁽⁷⁾. These claims are relevant not just for a single researcher, but also for a whole research group or even a field of authorities. The social characterization of scientific researchers determined that "the group as a whole was to stand apart from the rest of society," as Veysey puts it ⁽⁸⁾. This distance was necessary to fulfill the requirements of true knowledge, though, practically speaking, it served to invest a mystical authority onto those whose job it was to bestow the authority of professionalism ⁽⁹⁾.

Weber, invoking the notion of Gestell from Heidegger's "The Question Concerning Technology," argues that the authority of knowledge in modern science depends upon securing a theoretical--and as Humboldt suggests, a seemingly transcendental--place from where mastery over an object may be possible. That such a place is not only epistemic, but also institutional and even psychological, is a fact embedded in the history of the modern university.

System, Knowledge, and Information

Despite this essential core of the university, its pursuit of mastery has, needless to say, not always been pure. Within the American university, particularly toward the last half of the nineteenth century, practical knowledge was deemed an important component of the university, though what "practical" meant was variable, and, in any case, the necessity that it be taught as true science was never in doubt (10). With the institutionalization of "practical" fields, professionalism turned from an identification with knowledge toward a mastery and control of its application. Mastery and control were explicitly extended from an appropriation of objects to knowledge itself.

As Casey notes, Melvil Dewey, in founding the Columbia School of Library Economy, sought to professionalize the knowledge of librarians in order to instill greater labor efficiency in their work (11). Such efficiency was promoted not only through the school's methods of "systematic" instruction, but even through the very design of the School's library (12). For Dewey, the term "system" connoted a completeness and comprehensiveness in instruction, knowledge, and labor. It signified mastery over materials and over knowledge, and for Dewey, was synonymous with the notions of administration and economic application. As indicated by his address to Columbia's Board of Trustees, it was important for Dewey that bibliography, as well as other topics at the future School of Library Economy, be brought within an administrative--that is, a systematic--mode of instruction so that library labor be "more expeditiously accomplished and vastly more efficient" (13). After all, the library school at Columbia was the school of library economy, not the school of library bibliography.

Dewey's application of the term "system" in regard to education is one indication of the tremendous influence that the German university had upon the American university during the late nineteenth century (14). In appropriating the German idea of "system," the Americans retained the term's connotations of completeness and coherence, but completely missed the idealist epistemology behind it and the politically critical role that this term played in the *Wissenschaft*. So, instead of education being a practice governed by research and directed toward an almost unattainable goal of pure knowledge or truth, it--and "science" in general--became a method of passing down true knowledge in order to make practice more economical and more efficient. System became less of an ideal and more of a practice by professionals. To put this another way, instead of theory being the result of a theoretical praxis, theory was understood to be an accomplished fact merely to be put into professional practice. Despite the egalitarian presumptions of the American university, theory, understood in this manner, consolidated the authority of the university professional in a way that was suggested, but never fulfilled, by Humboldt's original notion of research. "System," in the American context, was a term used not to guide the future of research, but rather, to control present-day teaching and labor.

However, if one leaves out Dewey's emphasis on application, we can see that his notion of professional knowledge does agree with the underlying logic of control that lies at the core of professionalism since Humboldt. Though Humboldt's university professionalism supposedly is open to endless research, it is authorized by an underlying certainty that professionals do have, or will have, mastery over both the objects of their study and of the knowledge of a field itself (15). This issue of control forms the essence of the university professional's authority, and it leads, as Weber argues to a certain isolation and phobia on the part of the researcher and the research group (16). Once again, Humboldt's phrase, "isolation and freedom" characterizes both the epistemic and the professional conditions for knowledge. Within the actual institution of the teaching university, it is a phrase that indicates both an identity with knowledge and a mastery over it.

In the professionalism of European documentation, however, the term "system" slowly came to represent a different set of values than it did in either German idealism or American "practicalism." "System" and "systematicity" gradually became further removed from the idea of professional mastery and slowly became identified with standardization. The concept of control shifted from that of subjective mastery to that of an "objective" institutionalization of privileged codes, linkages, and pathways of knowledge. This evolution can be seen in the work of two documentalists, Paul Otlet (17) and, later, Suzanne Briet (18) whose major works are separated by seventeen years and the Second World War. Though Otlet opened the "economy" of libraries to formats other than books, such as the telephone and the emerging television, and also argued for standardization as the defining ground for documentation, the technology and international organizations of the pre-World War I era led him to paradoxically envision an international library as a localized institution (within the Mundaneum, to be established in Geneva). By such institutionalization, global systematicity remained within the mastery and control of a single institution and set of professionals.

But global systematicity was seen very differently by Briet, who indicated that the global control of information was achieved through the "technique" of documentation. Technique included standardization and even involved the privileging of the languages of World War II's victorious Allied Powers as the standard for documentary communication (19). The professional system was thus displaced beyond both the professional mind and the physical institution into a technical realm, which included, but was not at all limited to information technology equipment. Nevertheless, the productive flow of a system of information still depended on a professionally authorized set of instruments--such as language. Knowledge was still a system that the professional knew and used as a colonizing instrument in defining, authorizing, and maintaining power over objects and over a professional field--or even a global population.

This position of control, however, seems to be made problematic, and may even be challenged, in a later text of Briet's on the relationship of librarians and documentalists (20). In this text, one of the last that Briet wrote on documentation

(Briet was also a Rimbaud scholar as well as an author of a very interesting avant-gardist autobiography), she makes several observations that seem to redefine the nature of professionalism, altering its traditional relation to knowledge. Briet does this in a section entitled "The Profession of the Documentalist" in which she explores the nature of professionalism by discussing several major qualities that distinguish documentalists and documentation from general librarianship.

For Briet, the documentalist was what we would call a subject specialist. This meant that the documentalist was a scholar within an academic field. Like the scholar, the documentalist is dynamic--he or she is concerned with the movement of science and the necessity of a dynamic flow of information or the existence of a science. But despite this scholarly status, the documentalist, by virtue of dealing with information, has a unique relation to knowledge--and therefore a unique relation to traditional professional authority, a relation, we may suggest, that all scholars increasingly share. Briet states the relation of the documentalist to knowledge through the use of a metaphor: "It/she [documentation/the documentalist (Elle)] must be at the tip (pointe) of the research, and even in a certain measure--as the dog on the hunt--totally before (avant), guided, guiding"(21). For Briet, it is clear that the position of the documentalist, who precedes the researcher/teacher, has a temporal as well as a spatial component. As Briet writes, "The tools, techniques, and persons (Les organismes) of documentation work, overall, in the immediate, in the becoming of science (22).

The position that Briet assigns to the scholar-documentalist in regard to knowledge is different from that traditionally assigned to the scholar (a position previously identified in terms of the duplication of the formal conditions for knowledge). Briet's position, however, is one that is becoming more common as scholarship becomes more interdisciplinary, more open to public critique, and more self-critical of its own boundaries. This is to say, knowledge becomes more overtly deterritorialized within the information flows that define it. What is significant in Briet's formulation is that she locates a position of knowledge exterior to and temporally before what in modernism was called "science"--that is, true bodies of knowledge. In so doing, Briet calls into question the idea of professional mastery that was linked to traditional "scientific" knowledge--an idea that forms the essence of the university's authority of professionalism, and, of course, forms the basis for library and information science since Dewey.

Returning to Briet's metaphor for a moment (giving the neglected Briet the courtesy of taking her text seriously) we must note that if the dog is before the master, leading the master--not simply retrieving, but hunting--then the master can no longer be said to have total mastery. On the hunt, the master and the dog are no longer at home, and the master is no longer the master who is totally at home in his or her mastery over the dog. What defines the hunt is precisely that the master and dog are in the field. This dynamic activity links the master and the dog, but it takes mastery out-of-doors, beyond itself, into the uncertainty of the hunt. This uncertainty lies at the heart of information, which gives to knowledge any mastery it

may be deemed to have in terms of truth and social authority. As Briet suggests, information lies before what in modernity was called knowledge, and thus it lies exterior to the traditional professional competency which is associated with knowledge. Yet, as Briet tells us, this knowledge that is before knowledge is professional; it is the professionalism of the documentalist, that is, a professionalism bound with information.

In Briet's scenario, knowledge and the professional--taken out of the security and self-certainty of their "isolation" by the nose of the hound--are left in a strange, as Freud said, *unheimlich* (literally, "unhomelike") place. They are positioned between the familiar and what is totally foreign--between knowledge and the unknown. Briet's text indicates the ambiguity of this position by abandoning the stiff, declarative rhetoric of the standard academic article and entering the "murkier" regions of metaphor. In placing knowledge and the professional here, Briet rhetorically frames them with an aesthetic device. An aesthetic device is a device of art and of feeling (from the Greek *aesthesis*). For Russian formalist artists and theorists in the teens and twenties, art was *ostranenie*. As this term is often translated, art was strange and defamiliarizing of knowledge; it deterritorialized--or drew out--the domains of knowledge into the uncertain in order to critique and reconstitute knowledge. This is the place, if not the same role, into which Briet casts documentation and the documentalist profession. Information is not knowledge because it is "before" modernist knowledge. But without information, knowledge and mastery can't be claimed and an institution of research cannot be established. Knowledge and professionalism--as modernity knew these terms--therefore depend upon a loss of control over themselves in order to be. They may be guiding, but ultimately, they must be, first of all, guided.

"Information" and Professional Ethics

How does this loss of control affect professional authority, especially the professional authority that authorizes professional authority in general--namely, the professional authority of the university and its authorized personnel? What does it mean to speak of a professional community and knowledge which no longer define themselves, but are defined by that which lies before them?

First, it is necessary to acknowledge that the presence of this exteriority is always necessary for the definition of a field of knowledge or a community. As Weber suggests, any community or language (and both community and language are necessary for professionalism) defines itself by distinguishing itself from that which is outside it (23). Identity is a function of difference. In the case of original research--which lies at the forefront, or tip, of knowledge, as it were--this "before" (*avant*) is not simply a case of building an epistemic territory out of constant borrowings from other fields, but this "before" constitutes a relation to a totality of language, society, and even nature itself. Knowledge is constructed in relation to a "total syntax," or, as

Wersig suggests, an open ecology of information--a multiplicity of information flows (24). Knowledge and professionalism begin with this totality and identify themselves by closing off and ordering certain flows so that a discursive and institutional body is formed.

On the other hand, it is clear from the history of disciplinarity and the university that certain informational flows--certain forces--vie for and determine the priorities and nature of knowledge. How certain forces are admitted to a discipline while others are denied acceptance is not simply a function of the tradition of that discipline. It is also a function of how that discipline sees itself and how it is seen within the larger world. Such mutual recognitions cannot be understood solely in terms of the "goings-on" of a discipline from within, but rather, that "within" must be viewed in terms of the "on-goings" that form the boundaries and the future of a discipline from its exteriority (25). For example, Dewey's School of Library Economy was not founded on a closed body of principles (however much Dewey believed to the contrary), but rather through larger notions of labor economy and machinic metaphors for work and education that came to define Columbia's school and subsequent library and information schools. And, of course, those cultural notions and metaphors in turn derived their validity within various fields and discourses by appealing to the informational flows of a natural world.

The positioning of research and the researcher not simply within the boundaries of a field, but at the edge--the beyond--of a field, is, as Derrida argues, particularly important for professional schools (26). Though professional schools have traditionally attempted to describe their tasks in terms of the prescriptive application of knowledge, they have, by an emphasis on praxis, brought into question the very notion of a pure, "theoretical" knowledge that could then be merely applied. Consequently, they have found themselves in the paradoxical situation of simultaneously assuming the autonomy of knowledge and assuming the necessity that knowledge begins with practice. This simultaneous desire for a pure theoretical reason and a pure practical reason responds to the idealist aims of Humboldt's notion of science, but it is problematic in regard to the actual construction and practice of professional schools, not to mention in regard to the nature of empirical science since Humboldt.

Once freed of the promise of a pure knowledge which either composes a discipline or is always to come, the practitioner must resolve questions of his or her profession's boundaries, determinations, and theoretical and practical groundings. As Derrida argues, in the critical gap between what a profession is and where it goes new questions arise for a professional school. Indeed, the resolution of these founding questions constitutes an ethical demand for a profession--a demand that is never finished. By raising questions about the nature and groundings of a discipline, one necessitates the interrogation and contestation of those historical and philosophical narratives that have previously legitimized the prescriptive practices of a profession, and such questions require that disciplinary knowledge itself be interrogated about that which defines it, before itself, in the social and

natural world. These gestures are necessary in order to determine the ways in which a discipline is coded and defined and to explore the ways in which a discipline codes and defines itself as a machine of discourse production, research, and practice.

Last, and by far not least, defining research and practice outside of a modernist framework not only demands a critical rethinking of old ways and forms of knowing and doing, but, as Weber suggests, it also demands that the professional adopt a new stance that corresponds to the new position which science assumes in relation to the object and to knowledge. It requires that professional knowledge as a task of mastery be replaced by a professional knowledge in awe of its debt to society and to nature--to those forces which literally in-form it as a body of language and of persons. Such awe is sublime. But unlike the Kantian sublime, this awe is not simply arresting. Any narrative of the forces that have informed a profession ultimately must be provisional and is destined to be replaced as new forces carry the profession into the future and thus demand new narratives. The narratives that respond to this awe have a temporal--and thus--highly immediate and necessary role in directing a profession toward those forces which can most truthfully explain the objects and grounds of a profession. Awe does not negate the Enlightenment demand for truth in science, but instead, strips knowledge of its isolation and its universal claims, and thus, makes knowledge specific. The theoretical knowledge which is a science must respond within a space of immediate praxis, so as to choose which flows of force will in-form it and will help direct its future. Here, there is no distinction between theory and practice, since the practical future is made up of discursive diagrams, feelings, and visions. Out of the awe of a total syntax, out of the force of competing lines of information, a profession, as any body-to-come (i.e., any subject), must emerge and must take, as an informational response, responsibility for its destiny. Unlike mastery, this sense of professionalism is what Félix Guattari called a "subjectivity of the outside" (27). Freed of the illusion of pure knowledge, the professional must act in the aesthetic--in what informs, but is not yet certain. In the postmodern world, information and the aesthetic must be engaged as conditions--the most absolute conditions--of knowledge (28).

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