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# Paradoxical Views of "Librarian" in the Rhetoric of Library Science Literature: A Fantasy Theme Analysis

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by

Richard A. Stoddart and Adrienne R. Lee

*"Rhetoric may be defined as the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion." - Aristotle*

A great meeting point of professional and public perception is found within the library. The conception of the *librarian*, and what its function is, can differ widely between the literature of library science and real-world public perception. Through academic and professional literature scholars define the character or *ethos* of their respective discipline from which the audience or public must draw conclusions. Explicating the rhetorical implications of academic and professional library literature is one method to uncover the persuasiveness of the definition this discipline has forged internally within librarianship and externally within the arena of the library. Often the impression of the internal professional academic audience as to their defined role can vary quite significantly from the expectations of the public-at-large. This disjoint and incompatibility in perceptions has real-world effects for librarians and their patrons. It appears that there is a schism between the public's conception of the *librarian* and the internal rhetorical construction of the *librarian* that is put forth in library literature. This paper will explore the roots of this schism through the use of Fantasy-Theme rhetorical analysis of library science literature and the impact this literature has in constructing the role of *librarian*.

Research in the sociology of science, specifically drawing from the work of Robert K. Merton, supports the idea that scientists act as rhetoricians who attempt to manipulate the characteristics of Aristotle's *ethos* (intelligence, moral character, and goodwill) within their professional literature to advance the academic and scientific legitimacy of their discipline (Prelli 48). Scientists and scholars seek to manufacture a favorable rhetorical worldview through which the public can view its claims.

A scientist's professional *ethos* depends not only on how audiences perceive his or her competence, but also on how that scientist's 'place' within a legitimating scientific community is viewed. To the extent that a rhetor's connection with his or her community becomes confusing, so too does the legitimacy of his or her aim and claims (Prelli, 55).

Within the library, there is a definite confusion as to the role of the librarian. This confusion is rooted in the competition of differing definitions of *librarian* between those adopted by the public and those embraced by librarians themselves. Library science literature has well addressed the problem of the negative stereotype of the librarian within its literature.

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Shuman notes that

perhaps one of the reasons librarians are so concerned with their image is our recognition that what people think of us not only limits our status and salaries, but also the growth of our profession and the funding and use of libraries...Few people outside the library profession understand exactly who librarians are—or what librarians do (Shuman, 86).

Because librarians on the “front lines” are dealing with the public on a daily basis, they are painfully aware of the discrepancies between what they do and what the public *thinks* they do. Bobrovitz and Griebel conducted a three-part study that consisted of surveying community leaders and library and information professionals, conducting street interviews, and analyzing elementary school children’s artistic depictions of librarians. The majority of the children’s pictures showed women with books, while the street interviews resulted in frequent use of words such as, “books”, “older” and “lady.” The library and information professionals had a positive view of themselves and their colleagues but the community leaders indicated that they increasingly do not use libraries or see the need for librarians in relation to their personal or professional lives. Of these, 48% also believed that librarians only held a bachelor’s degree, and they ranked teaching and technology skills as a low priority for librarians (Bobrovitz, Griebel).

In an age of “instant information” with the Internet, views like this make libraries and librarians seem more and more irrelevant. While librarians are respected and valued within the profession, the popular media is marketing an image to the public more effectively than librarians are promoting themselves.

It is hoped that this paper will further illuminate the sources of these contrasting definitions of the *librarian* within the patron/librarian interaction, as well as show that the burden of this disjoint is not wholly on the patron but equally shared by the librarian

and texts surrounding their discipline. In addition, this paper might speak to a possible source of “librarian angst” upon discovering that a significant amount of “reference work” involves directing people to the bathroom, policing for inappropriate computer use, and helping patrons print materials. This is in contrast to the higher level definition found within library science texts which places the librarian in the critical role as a facilitator of the information exchange between the librarian and patron.

### **The Method: Fantasy-Theme Analysis to Uncover**

A method to critically examine library science texts is Fantasy-Theme Analysis as developed by Bormann. A similar Fantasy-Theme Analysis applying to academic literature was done by Chesebro, who investigated the construction of *homosexuality* within literature of the Social Sciences. Chesebro’s prior literature analysis will serve as a template for the examination of the construction of the *librarian* within library science texts. Much like Chesebro’s work our analysis seeks “to specify what Bormann identifies as ‘*fantasy types*’ or ‘recurring scenarios in a body of discourse’ in order to allow identification of the ways in which these fantasy themes are ‘integrated’ to create a ‘coherent’ and ‘shared’ overview or ‘rhetorical vision’ (Chesebro 129).” The library science texts interrogated in this paper consist of introductory course textbooks, specifically those that emphasize reference or public services, since these are the areas of librarianship that the public interacts with and finalizes their public perception of the *librarian* against.

Bormann’s development of Fantasy-Theme Analysis draws from the theory of symbolic convergence which relies on two assumptions. First, that communication or rhetoric creates reality; and second, “that symbols not only create reality for individuals but that individuals’ meanings for symbols



can converge to create a *shared* reality for the participants (Foss 123)." Therefore, if communication is seen as supporting a view of reality; then library science literature can be seen as rhetorically constructing a suggested "shared reality" of the *librarian* that librarians incorporate into their worldview.

Bormann describes this rhetorical process as made up of "small group fantasy chains", "public fantasy events" and a larger complex rhetorical vision. It is the "small group" which articulates a shared drama or *fantasy-theme* comprised of assigned roles such as heroes and villains. This drama is chained out into larger "public fantasy events" which help explain these actions. The success of these themes is measured by how well it is incorporated into the larger rhetorical vision and accepted by these differing audiences (Bormann 251). Based on Bormann's outline, the concept of the *librarian* seems to be at a crossroads regarding its transition from the role ascribed to it from the literature of library science and its acceptance into the larger overall rhetorical vision of public perception.

### **Applying the Method to the Text: The Librarian as the Patron's Information Champion**

Introductory library science textbooks, such as *Foundations of Library and Information Science*, describe information as an "explosion", "flood", "bombardment", or "overload" (Rubin 1). Within these works librarians are cast as the protagonist who "saves" the patron from this "deluge" of information or rescues the patron who is "lost" in this rising "sea of information" (Katz, Volume 1, 4). Library science literature thus assigns the role of the *librarian* as a protector who shepherds the patron through the conflicting demands that information can present. The librarian becomes an "information mediator" who negotiates a peaceful solution to patron's information

queries. In addition, the librarian simultaneously reduces the patron's "information anxiety" by organizing the "information superglut" and weeding through the "abundance of garbage" modern information presents (Katz, Volume 2, 17).

Library science literature also endows librarians with powers or skills that are critical to the patron's information survival. Katz describes librarians as the "key individual" in the "information equation (Volume 1, 3)." Librarians possess a toolkit of skills involving service, resource selection, communication, and information technology that is assumed the patron does not possess. Thus, "common sense dictates that the professional reference librarian command and control information" (Katz, Volume 2, 18). This control allows the librarian to "tame the information giant (ibid)" or "empower (Katz, Volume 1, 7) the patron with information-finding skills, as if it is solely the librarian's gift to give."

The *librarian* has also been positioned within library science literature as a vital component in the information process. Librarians are "intellectuals" who stand between the societal "dumbing down" of the user population and information access (Katz, Volume 1, 6). This critical placement of the *librarian* is even applied on a larger scale than the simple library setting spilling outside its walls to influence national and cultural interests. "Reference librarians are leading the way in managing the flow of information which, in the 1990's, will dominate national interests (Ibid 5)." Librarians are seen as playing a "major role in the information society of tomorrow (Katz, Volume 2, 17)." That "he or she will be absolutely necessary" in their station as a librarian (ibid).

Foss states that Fantasy-Themes that "describe the world from the group's perspective are three types, corresponding to the elements necessary to create a drama: setting, characters, and actions (129)." The constellation of library elements outlined above certainly meet these criteria. The "setting" in this sense, is not only the physical library, but more

importantly the description in the literature of the *librarian* as a “mediator” who is literally and metaphorically standing between the patron and information. The literature even expands this “setting”, suggesting that the *librarian* is placed in a critical position between the nation and information. The “characters” of the Fantasy-Theme concern the *librarian* as protector or hero, the complexities of information as a villain to be overcome, and the patron as the metaphorical damsel in distress. The “actions” at work in this drama are embodied by the skills librarians employ as service providers as advocated in library science texts.

From the librarian’s perspective, library science has achieved a successful rhetorical construction of the *librarian* in its introductory texts wherein the *librarian* becomes an essential character in the information transaction. However, to be truly effective, this construction must transcend the literature and become incorporated within the larger rhetorical vision of the public. Otherwise, librarians are simply performing a one-person play to an audience of no one but themselves.

### **The Results of the Fantasy-Theme Construction of the Librarian: A Patron without a Hero**

The Fantasy-Theme construction of the *librarian* as the hero in a patron’s information struggle may at first glance seem an obvious deduction. Librarians readily buy into this rhetorical vision and seek to reflect that within their duties in the library as “information professionals”. However all parties relevant to the librarian’s function are not necessarily purchasing this identity of the librarian as a protector and server of the patron. Critical stakeholders in the communication exchange within the library are the library-users themselves who are the direct recipients of librarian attention. Bormann speaks of group

fantasy-themes “going public” in order to “gain converts” to a rhetorical vision. Librarians and the resulting library science literature have failed to expand this concept rhetorically beyond the borders of their discipline to where it matters most, in the practical and direct relationship with patrons of everyday encounters.

During reference encounters, patrons seem to still be interacting with the rhetorical vision of the negative librarian stereotype which is characterized by an “obsession with order, sexual repression, matronly appearance, dowdy dress, fussiness, dour facial expressions, and monosyllabic speech (Radford 60).” The origins of this more prevalent fantasy-theme are firmly rooted in the media channels that influence our modern day perceptions. In a recent installment of the Star Wars film franchise, a librarian/archivist character was portrayed by a “dour-faced” elderly woman who abruptly and unhelpfully indicated to the Jedi patron that the information he was seeking did not exist. Obviously, this librarian did not embody the Aristotelian rhetorical notions of intelligence, moral character, or goodwill. This image of the librarian is ironic considering the fact this librarian was surrounded by a variety of futuristic technology to manipulate and control information for the patron’s benefit yet the dominant negative stereotype still was applied. While librarians attempt to displace this type of stereotype by changing library-users’ perceptions one patron at a time, one questions the effectiveness of this effort when audiences that viewed this movie spent over 300 million dollars to fill theaters across the United States. Those dollars translate into a lot of individual hearts and minds for librarians to reach out to, and this is but one instance of the perpetuation of the librarian stereotype within popular media. With this contrasting image still in patrons minds versus the rhetorical construction of the *librarian* presented in library science texts, no wonder patrons are confused as to the role of the librarian in the library. Leckie has noted that in her teaching experience the majority of



her students have no idea what a librarian does (205). Thus, the role of the librarian remains questionable in many patron's eyes or even worse "(l)ibrarians are portrayed as intimidating and scary, inspiring fear in the library user (Radford 60)", which is certainly not the hero role as the "tamer of the information giant" that the librarian's see for themselves.

The practical function of librarianship still requires its interaction within a society that maintains the static definition of the *librarian* as a simple organizer of books. Indeed, the term *librarian* as currently defined by *Oxford English Dictionary* (Online) is simply a "keeper or custodian of the library". There is no mention of service to the patron, mediator of information, or "key" individual in the information equation. The shelving and stamping of books more readily fits the role of this librarian as "custodian" than the dynamic definition librarians have cast themselves within their literature. The *librarian as custodian* stereotype presents an alternate, perhaps more prevalent, Fantasy-Theme rhetorical vision. Here we see the *librarian* not as a protector of the patron from the onslaught of information, but instead the *librarian* is cast as a protector of books. The setting of the library then becomes not one of benevolent information exchange but a place of power and domination maintained by actions not aimed at helping the patron but maintaining the order of the library environment. Within this rhetorical vision as employed by patrons, the *librarian* becomes an obstacle that must be overcome in the information process. With this image mind, it is no wonder patrons are reluctant to ask the librarian for help.

### **Conclusion: The Inherent Communication Conflict Identified**

Library science has succeeded in presenting a rhetorical argument as to the importance of the *librarian* in the library. Reflecting on this importance

serves to feed the rhetorical vision of the librarian as hero. The language, phrasing, and rhetorical construction of images found with library science literature supports this assertion. But sadly, as apparent by this paper's Fantasy-Theme rhetorical analysis of librarian literature contrasted against modern media stereotypes, this only serves to stroke the ego of the librarian in the field not provide practical application to the patrons being served. Foss suggests that, "Fantasy themes tell a story that accounts for the group's experience and that is the reality of the participants (Foss 123)" The reality of the *librarian* as deployed by librarians is not in sync with the larger reality of the patron. The patron still embraces the *custodian stereotype* within their rhetorical vision. Library science literature may indeed be telling the "truth" as to the real role of the *librarian* in the library. But if librarians assume that by simply "acting like a librarian" the public will accept and understand this role they are mistaken. It is if the librarian is performing Shakespeare but the patron is expecting a television sitcom.

Prelli reminds us, "To the extent that a rhetor's connection with his or her community becomes confusing, so too does the legitimacy of his or her aim and claims (55)." This confusion leads to miscommunications and misconceptions within the library and library interaction. Obviously, the librarian as hero has yet to "go public" beyond the limited sphere of librarianship. Patrons are clearly not in the throes of "hero worship" seeking out the librarian for every question they have, but in reality more in the grips of library anxiety associated with the negative librarian stereotype.

When Linda Wallace interviewed people about their perceptions of librarians she received replies such as, "Old fashioned. Homely. Glasses...Reclusive...Reserved. Dress conservatively. Bookish. Introverted...Studious. Unattractive. Socially inept. Dull. (Wallace, ). Wallace

goes on to give suggestions of how librarians might market their image more effectively. A *Library Journal* editorial by John N. Berry is entitled, "Tell 'Em What Librarians Do Each Day" and suggests promoting skills over image. Another editorial, from *American Libraries*, by Leonard Kniffel, "That's Nice, but What Do You Do?" addresses the same issue: how to get past the stereotype and let people know the

work of a librarian truly entails. Until librarians take suggestions such as these seriously and move their rhetorical theme from the limited audience of library texts to more public arenas such as the media there will always be an inherent communication conflict within the library. If they cannot, the results of this conflict will remain very costly for both the librarian and the patron.

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