

Responsible Librarianship: Library Policies for Unreliable Systems
by David Bade. Duluth, MN: Library Juice Press, 2007. 181 pp. ISBN
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In the intellectual battle for the future of the library and the profession of librarianship a majority of the terrain is taken up by two opposite, but equally naïve points of view. The first says something like the following: The library as we know it is an institution that is doomed and out of touch with its users. Its functions can be much better fulfilled by new information technologies such as Google or Web 2.0. The opposing position claims that new information technologies such as Google and “folksonomies” represent a threat to the traditional values of the library and, perhaps more importantly, to librarianship as a profession. In his book *Responsible Librarianship: Library Policies for Unreliable Systems*, David Bade eschews both points of view to offer a nuanced argument not only in opposition to blind technocracy and outdated cost-benefit models in library administration, but for the specific and iterative process by which each individual library’s function is decided, making the cult of the user, as it is generally formulated in Library and Information Studies (LIS) literature, seem irrelevant and short-sighted. Perhaps most importantly, Bade’s book represents a vital and often absent progressive imagination of the library and librarianship. While many LIS intellectuals are content to either accept Google and Web 2.0 wholeheartedly or be resigned to the conservatism of the “traditional” librarian, David Bade imagines a different future for libraries that is neither futurological nor conservative but instead stresses a return to the local, broadly conceived, and an increased engagement with community.

Responsible Librarianship consists of three sections. A long essay titled “Politics and Policies for Database Policies” constitutes the bulk of the book. It is followed by two shorter pieces; one, a letter to the Autocat mailing list, is a condensation of Bade’s monograph *The Theory and Practice of Bibliographic Failure* (2004), and the other is a paper presented to the Second Meeting of the Library of Congress Working Group on the Future of Bibliographic Control. This review will focus on the most substantial of the three.

Bade is a Senior Librarian specializing in Eastern European materials at the Joseph Regenstein Library at the University of Chicago. As he states in the preface, all three of the pieces in *Responsible Librarianship* were spawned by the Library of Congress’s decision to stop providing authority records for series, owing to the belief that keyword-level searching provides sufficient access to series information. This fact should signal to readers of this review that *Responsible Librarianship* is, first, a book written from a librarian to librarians, a fact that may be perceived as either strength or weakness depending on one’s perspective. For those embedded enough in the world of cataloging to recognize

the debates Bade describes, his meticulous and lucid examples, culled from experience, lend the book authority and weight. For the uninitiated, it may be more difficult to place Bade's argument in the broader context of issues surrounding organizational change and culture to which it is also relevant.

"Politics and Policies for Database Qualities" systematically addresses bibliographic control and its function by simultaneously utilizing the literatures of LIS, philosophy, and management/ergonomics studies. Bade begins the piece with a brief account of the notion of quality and qualities, citing Plato and Galileo in his assertion that the definition of quality, broadly speaking, can never be separated from the stated goals and objectives at which a specific institutional activity is directed. So, as Bade points out in the case of bibliographic data, one cannot speak of data simply as a thing in itself, but must take into account its creation as data. For this reason recent emphasis on quality control of bibliographic data as a problem of searching systems is inherently flawed, because what is being studied in such a case is not the quality of the data itself, but that data's relationship to a retrieval system. Following from this definition of quality as inextricable from context, Bade sets out to answer the questions, "What are libraries for?" and "What are bibliographic catalogues for?" with the aim of articulating a set of goals that might then be used as metrics for judging quality in librarianship and cataloging.

In attempting to describe just what libraries are for, Bade astutely points out that determining the use and, further, goals of a library by studying its users—as is often the case in the prevalent LIS genre of user studies—is a problematic means of assessing quality. A library's users cannot be viewed as agents autonomous from the library itself, but are themselves defined by the goals and meanings attributed to a given library. One can never know the purposes or goals of users separately from their interactions with the library and librarians, so to determine these uses retroactively and from the point of view of only a randomly selected group of users misses the point that the "library user" is in fact not simply an individual, but a co-creation of her own desires as a patron and the goals, strengths, and mission of the particular library with which she interacts. Perhaps put more simply, user studies that put the onus of failure on the library without taking into account the particularity of *libraries* cannot say much in terms of measuring quality. Related to this, perhaps the most important element of this section of the piece is an argument for the role of the librarian as mediator in this constant dialog between patron and institution, a role that cannot be fulfilled, at least for now (but probably never) by technological systems, and one which highlights the dialectic relationship shared by a library and its users.

In the next section on the purpose of bibliographic catalogs, Bade quite deftly takes on the common argument that library catalogs ought to be usurped by Google by arguing that Google is not a catalog and thus cannot serve the same

purpose as a library catalog. Google is interested, Bade says, in a total list of links on the web, the documentation of all of the world's information. For Bade, this runs counter to the library catalog which is, by its very nature, finite. The concept of totality, argues Bade, is foreign to libraries because they contain limited numbers of materials whose strength is that their relationships to other items in the collection and to the network of recorded knowledge are explicit and detailed, enabling browsing and meaningful searching within a given piece of intellectual terrain.

The third section of *Responsible Librarianship* deals with databases as objects of policy and employs the ergonomics model of HROs (High Reliability Organizations) as a foil to the cost-benefit-analysis models of many American library administrators, who advocate for values like increased speed, minimal records, and automation in order to save money and increase production. As Bade states, HROs are interested in just the opposite of these values, which lead to failure through increased speed, complexity, and confusion and ultimately result in the failure of the organization. In other words, if libraries strive to be HROs, then current trends in library administration are a step in the wrong direction. Here Bade makes a rather smart rhetorical move by using management literature to illustrate the very backwardness of the library managers who, according to him, make similar accusations about library staff who resist their mandates for change. He ties the streamlined business model of many library administrators to the paradigmatic Shannon and Weaver model of information transfer that views bits of information as discrete entities to be transmitted efficiently. Unlike Shannon and Weaver's conception of information as self-evident, for Bade, valuing information (in the case of bibliographic records) as something created by librarians leads one not to deem efficiency the primary goal of library service, but rather to view quality and completeness of record as the most desirable goals. It is his general rejection of the Shannon and Weaver model, which views the content of records as given rather than produced, that informs much of Bade's arguments about what he views as the supreme failure of library policy at Cornell, a case study which I will not discuss here other than to endorse Bade's treatment of the topic and recommend it to readers.

Ultimately, if one were to find fault in *Responsible Librarianship* it would probably be in the almost alarmist tone the text takes on at times, insisting that the changes to libraries and cataloging in recent years threaten to invalidate and strip the profession. This is interesting, as in general Bade's writing suggests a rather refreshing lack of determinism. His critique of technocratic management is itself generally tempered by an acknowledgement that things continually change. In a sense, it may be best to think of *Responsible Librarianship* as polemic, in the most positive sense of the term, and with all the rigor that good polemic entails. Ultimately the depth, incisiveness, and passion of *Responsible Librarianship*, not

to mention its intelligent imagination of a different library policy, make it a worthwhile read for anyone interested in the politics of bibliographic catalogs. For those intimately involved in the cataloging profession, this book may throw some new light on day-to-day experiences and offer new insights into the truly political nature of bibliographic catalogs.

Reference

Bade, D. (2004). *The theory and practice of bibliographic failure, or, misinformation in the information society*. Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia: Chuluunbat.

Reviewer

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