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The Construction of Librarians' Professional Identities: A Discourse Analysis

La construction de l'identité professionnelle du bibliothécaire : Une analyse de discours

Deborah Hicks

Department of Educational Policy Studies, Faculty of Education, University of Alberta
deborah.hicks@ualberta.ca

Abstract: Professional identities shape the way the members of a profession interact with their clients and society. As librarians are service-oriented professionals, a discursively informed understanding of identity can provide a new way to examine identity and expose the ways it impacts and informs how librarians interact with their clients and society at large.

Keywords: professional identity, librarians, librarianship, service, discourse analysis

Résumé : L'identité professionnelle façonne la manière qu'a une profession d'interagir avec sa clientèle et la société. Les bibliothécaires étant des professionnels axés sur le service, une compréhension discursive de leur identité peut fournir une façon nouvelle d'examiner l'identité et d'exposer comment les bibliothécaires interagissent avec leurs clients et la société dans son ensemble.

Mots-clés : identité professionnelle, bibliothécaires, bibliothéconomie, service, analyse de discours

Introduction

New ways to organize, access, and use information are being developed every day. Hilbert and López (2011) estimated that between 1986 and 2007 computing capacity grew 58%, bidirectional telecommunication grew 28%, and the amount of globally stored information grew 23% per year. As a result there is more information in the world than ever before. As information specialists, librarians are uniquely placed to help their clients navigate and use this information for their work, education, and pleasure. Through the design, implementation, and provision of information services to the public, librarians attempt to meet the information needs of their communities. In doing so, they not only articulate a specific understanding of information and their community's information needs but communicate their professional identity and perspective as well. Public perceptions of

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librarians, however, are tied to the outdated understanding of librarians as keepers of the books (e.g., [OCLC 2005](#)). This creates a tension between the work librarians do and public perceptions of librarians that can create barriers to the effective delivery of information services. This interaction is precisely why understanding the professional identity of librarians is important.

Understanding the professional identity of librarians provides insight into the professional problems and concerns of librarianship, what it means to be a librarian, and how librarians themselves construct their understanding of librarianship. Such insights have implications for understanding how librarians comprehend their roles and the services they offer and the cultural and social origins of professional decision-making. In addition, these insights can lead to the development of professionally appropriate solutions to relevant problems, which in turn influences librarians' relationships with their communities and client bases.

Defining professional identity

This study uses a social constructionist framework to examine identity. *Professional identity* is defined here as a description, or representation, of the self within specific professional practices. The professional identity of librarians can be exposed by studying the language resources, or interpretive repertoires, librarians use when they speak about their profession. Interpretive repertoires are described as "the building blocks speakers use for constructing versions of actions, cognitive processes and other phenomena" ([Wetherell and Potter 1988](#), 172). Repertoires are linked to social groups, such as a profession. All members of a group draw on these repertoires when speaking about their work or profession. By focusing on how librarians describe their profession, attention can be drawn to how librarians themselves construct librarianship, and how this construction shapes their interactions with patrons, their local community, other professions, and society at large.

For professions, the linguistic resources that comprise their interpretive repertoires are provided to them through their professional practices. [Kemmis \(2010\)](#) described professional practices as a combination of three kinds of knowledge: the propositional, theoretical, and/or scientific knowledge unique to the profession; the profession's craft knowledge, or knowledge of how to do something; and personal knowledge about oneself and in relation to others. These practices are socially, culturally, and historically located and contextualized. Practices are more than just activities performed by professionals; their basis in the profession's knowledge base provides meaning and intention that guide the activities and identities of practitioners. In other words, these practices provide a particular view of what it means to be a professional as well as a specific way to act in the world.

A key feature of this social constructionist framework is that people do things with language. When language is examined for its interpretive repertoires, it is examined for its functions—both intended and unintended ([Wetherell and Potter 1988](#)). These functions can be to explain or justify an action, or they can work on an ideological level to legitimate the social position of a group. Therefore,

professional identity is more than simply a description of the self with specific practices—it also serve a purpose, or function, and has different social consequences and implications as a result.

Literature review

The professional identity of librarians has not been the subject of much recent academic inquiry, nor is it well understood by researchers. Much of the inquiry that purports to be about the professional identity of librarians is in fact about the professional image, status, and reputation of librarianship. It tells us little about the professional identity of librarians, except to inadvertently illustrate that librarians are concerned with their professional reputation. Technological changes, along with the disciplinary shift from “library science” to “library and information science,” triggered three seminal investigations into the identity of librarians during the late 1980s and early 1990s, by [Bennett \(1988\)](#), [Winter \(1988\)](#), and [Harris \(1992\)](#). Each approached the topic of identity differently. [Bennett \(1988\)](#) considered how the inclusion of information science changed the disciplinary identity of librarians. [Winter \(1988\)](#) examined how two clashing cultures within librarianship—freedom of information and a culture of control—dictated a particular world-view for librarians. [Harris \(1992\)](#) examined how the feminine nature of librarianship was being undermined by attempts to improve the profession's status. None of these authors defined what they meant by *identity*. While this study understands identity to be a description of the self within specific social practices, the concept of identity [Bennett \(1988\)](#), [Winter \(1988\)](#), and [Harris \(1992\)](#) used could be expressed as the influence of others' perceptions of librarianship on how librarians understood themselves. In other words, they conflated identity with image.

The professional image of librarianship is a common topic within the library and information science (LIS) literature. The majority of the literature on this topic is written by practitioners and is primarily concerned with how public perceptions influence the profession's status. In the more academically focused LIS literature, there are a variety of different approaches to the study of the profession's image. One approach examines various representations of librarianship, such as stereotypes and portrayals of librarians in popular culture ([Luthmann 2007](#); [Posner 2003](#); [G. Radford and M. Radford 2001](#); [M. Radford and G. Radford 1997, 2003](#)). A second approach examines how librarians see themselves ([Church 2003](#); [Dickinson 2003](#)). Finally, a third approach examines the influence popular perceptions have on the profession, from their impact on recruitment efforts, to the influence of the stereotype on librarian–patron relationships, to the ways popular representations affect the gender dynamics within the profession ([Fagan 2003](#); [Harris and Wilkinson 2001, 2004](#)).

There is a growing body of literature on librarians' identities as teachers. These studies focus on how librarians identify with their teaching role and less with their overall identity ([Davis 2007](#); [Julien and Genuis 2011](#); [Walter 2008](#)). [Julien and Genuis \(2011\)](#) were interested in understanding how librarians interpreted and gave meaning to their instructional roles. They found that instructional work was a central activity for librarians. Although their investigation

focused on a specific occupational role and not professional identity broadly, Julien and Genuis did highlight that one specific professional activity, such as instruction, does form part of a librarian's overall professional identity.

In addition to studies of specific role identities for librarians, there are studies that, perhaps inadvertently, shed light on the librarians' professional identities. Tuominen (1997) examined how librarians position themselves in relation to their users. Analysing the discourse of one influential text on information literacy (Carol C. Kuhlthau's *Seeking Meaning: A Process Approach to Library and Information Services*), he argued that librarians were constructed as rational and knowledgeable information experts while users were constructed as uncertain, ignorant, childlike, and in need of direction. The professional identity described by Tuominen was intimately linked to the identity the profession constructs for its users. If the user was childlike or uncertain, then the librarian was parental, on par with higher-status professions, such as physicians (positioning the user as a patient), and expert. Tuominen's findings were supported and extended by Sundin (2008), who examined how librarians used Web-based tutorials to express their identities as information-seeking experts. He identified four different approaches to information literacy that placed the librarians in four different expert roles—from experts on specific information resources to experts in communication between users and librarians. Sundin argued that Web-based tutorials acted as a platform for librarians to demonstrate and mediate their expertise to others. Similarly to Tuominen (1997), Sundin (2008) argued that librarians used these tutorials to position themselves as information experts, and in doing so they expressed some of their professional identity.

Research design

The questions guiding this research are (1) What are the interpretive repertoires that librarians use when articulating their professional identities? (2) How does this identity function socially? A discourse analysis approach was employed to examine the full range of interpretive repertoires employed by librarians when they construct their professional identities. Data representing different library sectors—public, academic, special, and school, as identified by *The Future of Human Resources in Canadian Libraries* (known as the 8Rs Study; Ingles et al. 2005)—were gathered from three different sources: professional journals, e-mail discussion lists, and research interviews. The use of multiple data-gathering methods provided the analysis with contextual triangulation, which offered reliability to the research findings. According to Talja (2005, 15), “[e]xplicit comparisons between different contexts of discussion ensure that the research does not comprise a case study with restricted generalizability.” The analysis of the data sets focused on the language resources that librarians used to describe themselves, the professional practices of librarianship, professionalism, and professional problems. These language resources were then analysed to identify the interpretive repertoires used by librarians when describing their professional identities. The analysis centred on the identification of patterns and followed a three-step procedure:

1. Analysing for inconsistencies and contradictions in descriptions of librarians, professional practices, professionalism, and professional problems in individual units of the data, such as an interview or journal article
2. Comparing these inconsistencies and contradictions to other parts of the data to identify recurring context-dependent patterns
3. Identifying the assumptions that underlay and supported these patterns (Talja 1999, 2005)

The professional journals selected for this study were identified using two procedures. First, the OCLC's *Snapshot of Priorities & Perspectives* reports (2011a, 2011b, 2011c) were used to identify the top-read journals in two library sectors (public and academic). Second, journals representing the remaining library sectors (special and school), and the Canadian library scene, were identified based on subscription numbers or affiliations with prominent professional associations and publishers. The following professional journals were included in this study:

- *American Libraries*
- *College & Research Libraries*
- *Feliciter*
- *Information Outlook*
- *Information Today*
- *Library Journal*
- *Public Libraries*
- *School Library Journal*
- *Teacher Librarian*

To determine what content would be included in the data set, the titles and abstracts of the articles, editorials, and letters to the editor for each journal were examined using inclusion/exclusion criteria. Content was included if it was published between 2000 and 2012 and addressed the topics of librarians, librarianship, professionalism, and/or professional problems. News reports, articles discussing best practices, conference reports, library profiles, book reviews, and obituaries were excluded from this study. If there was a question about an article's suitability for the study, the body of the article was examined to determine whether it met the inclusion/exclusion criteria. Approximately 1,700 individual articles were included in the final data set.

Five e-mail discussion lists were selected for this study. Each was selected because it encouraged active discussion among its subscribers (i.e., was not a "read-only" list used to disseminate information) and had a publicly accessible archive. The following e-mail discussion lists were included in this study:

- CLA (the official email discussion list for the Canadian Library Association)
- ILI-L (sponsored by the Association of College and Research Libraries)
- LM_NET (dedicated to school library media specialists)
- MEDLIB-L (sponsored by the Medical Library Association)
- PUBLIB (hosted by OCLC and dedicated to public libraries and librarians)

Only messages and discussions from September 2010 to December 2012 were selected, to provide consistency within this section of the data set. Over 800 pages of discussion were collected for analysis. The inclusion/exclusion criteria used were similar to the ones used for the professional literature. The subject line of each message was first studied to determine whether or not the posting was appropriate for this study. If the subject line was unclear, then the postings themselves were examined to determine whether they met the inclusion/exclusion criteria. All postings in a selected discussion thread were included in the data set.

Sixteen interviews with working Canadian librarians representing all four of the library sectors were conducted. Following the 8Rs Study definition (Ingles et al. 2005), a librarian was defined as a person holding a master of library and information science (or equivalent) from an LIS program accredited by the American Library Association and working in a position at the professional level as a librarian (or equivalent information professional position). In discourse analysis, the size of the sample is secondary to the amount of discourse gathered. The focus is on how language is used, not the language users (Potter and Wetherell 1987). The intent is not to produce generalizable findings but to have well-supported claims that make general statements: "We . . . want to support the general statements that transcend individual episodes. But we want to support the general statements through actual demonstrations, not through sweeping attempts at generalization" (Wood and Kroger 2000, 78). Therefore, when selecting a sample, the goal is to ensure that the full scope of the discourse under investigation is sampled. To ensure the all the interpretive repertoires used by librarians to describe their professional identities were examined, this study used maximum variation sampling. Maximum variation sampling allows researchers to find participants "who cover the spectrum of positions and perspectives in relation to the phenomenon one is studying" (Palys 2008, par. 9). This sampling technique allowed all of the repertoires used to come to the fore. Participants were selected because they represented one of the four library sectors. The participants had a variety of professional experiences and different personal backgrounds. Of the participants, six worked in public libraries, four in academic libraries, three in special libraries, and three in school libraries. Fourteen (87.5%) were female, and two (12.5%) were male. Three (18.75%) were born in a country other than Canada. All of the participants had received their master of library and information science (or equivalent) from a Canadian university. They had a variety of professional experience levels, from 2 years to over 35 years. In addition, some of the participants had worked only for their current organization, while others had worked for various organizations and in a range of library sectors. Topics covered in the interviews included the participants' descriptions of how they entered the profession, their work, their professional activities, and their thoughts on professionalism. Interviews were conducted in a location of the participant's choice (such as the participant's office, a meeting room, or a cafe) and lasted from one to two hours each. Each interview was recorded, professionally transcribed, and participants were assigned pseudonyms. Ethics approval for this study was granted by University of Alberta's Research Ethics Board.

Following [Potter and Wetherell \(1987\)](#), the data were first thematically coded to help “squeeze an unwieldy body of discourse into manageable chunks” (167). Coding at this stage of the analysis has a pragmatic, not an analytic, intent. The purpose is to organize the data into broad themes to produce sets of instances of occurrence that can later be analysed. Themes emerged from the data based on recurring words, phrases, and ideas. Sixteen broad themes were initially identified and coded using NVivo.

- Advocacy
- Attitudes
- Change
- Employment concerns
- Expertise
- Future of librarianship
- Library as place
- Other non-professional identities
- Perceptions of others
- Professionalism
- Reputation
- Roles
- Technology
- Service
- Users
- Values

The analysis occurred after the data had been coded. Discourse analysis relies heavily on the close reading of coded data sets. As stated above, the analysis of the data focused on the variation and similarities both within individual parts of the data, such as an interview or article, and across the data set. Attention was paid to the context and function of the repertoires and regularities of language use. [Talja \(1999, 466\)](#) described the process of identifying interpretive repertoires as “putting together a jigsaw puzzle.” Following [Potter and Wetherell \(1987, 168\)](#), each “chunk,” or coded data set, was examined with two questions in mind: “[W]hy am I reading this passage in this way? What features produce this reading?” In addition, attention was paid to how certain phrases or terms were used, the context of and reason for their use, and the intended (or unintended) function/purpose of their use. The goal of the analysis was to identify when and how each interpretive repertoire was used and in relation to which topics.

Findings

The analysis identified a variety of interpretive repertoires:

- Service repertoire
- Change repertoire
- Professionalism repertoire
- Library-as-place repertoire
- Insider/outsider repertoire

Each of these repertoires served a different social purpose or function in the speech and texts of librarians. The most prominent repertoire was the service repertoire. Although the remaining discussion will focus on the service repertoire, it is important to note that repertoires are not employed in isolation. People will often draw on different repertoires in a single text, sentence, or utterance

to construct a particular identity in a specific context (Potter 1996); therefore, although the findings and discussion will centre on the service repertoire, the other repertoires will be discussed in and through this discourse.

Service repertoire

The service repertoire was found in the text and speech of librarians throughout the data set. Service, broadly defined, was often considered to be the essence of librarianship. Service included activities such as public services (for instance, reference, instruction, and reader's advisory), technology services (from helping people with e-readers to providing public-access computers), the organization of information (from cataloguing to knowing how information on the Web is organized), provision of access to information (books, journals, DVDs, specialized databases, and the Internet), and professional service (such as publishing in journals, association membership and participation, and mentoring of other professionals). Service was described as a core value, the ethos and purpose of librarianship: "The preeminent value in librarianship is, of course, service" (Baker 2000, 47). As illustrated in the preceding quote, the centrality of service in librarianship was often stated matter-of-factly and without question. Service was so central to the professional identities of librarians that even librarians in non-public service roles referred to it as the heart of their work. Anna, an interview participant who worked as an information technology specialist in a public library, stated that although she rarely had contact with the public she still felt that the core of the profession, and her work, was service: "Well we're a service-oriented profession and that's, . . . I think that—maybe that is a core value for me . . . how can I serve the customer best." Occasionally, the centrality of service to the practice of librarianship was questioned. Adams (2000, 40) argued that professional expertise, and not service, was what made librarianship a special profession: "A service orientation isn't what makes librarians special. What makes the library profession unique is our set of skills and knowledge." In instances when the importance of service to the profession was questioned, professional values and expertise were often highlighted in place of service as the defining core of librarianship; however, the function of these values and expertise was to ensure that librarians provided high-quality, expert services to their user populations.

Technology and service

The service repertoire was often linked to the change repertoire. When employed with the service repertoire, the change repertoire was used to highlight how flexible librarians were when managing change on behalf on their users. Librarians identified changes related to information and communication technology (ICT) as having the largest effect on the profession. ICT-related changes were described using metaphors for uncertainty, such as "white water" and "bottomless pit." At the same time, ICT-related changes were perceived as fundamentally impacting core services: "We are grappling with what may prove to be the most critical change impacting library service in the past century: the emergence of computing as 'standard fare' service in libraries" (Hill 2009, 39). In

other words, ICT-based services were the “new normal” (Alire 2010, 6). By describing ICT-related service as “standard fare” and “the new normal” these librarians were rhetorically taking control of the perceived technology-based changes to the profession. If something is normal or standard, then it cannot be too unsettling to the ethos of the profession—service. Another way to take control of these changes was to reconsider and re-imagine traditional services in light of these changes. Words such as *educator*, *facilitator*, *teacher*, and *guide* were used to re-frame librarians' service responsibilities. This re-framing highlighted the educational roles of librarians. One e-mail discussion list participant on ILI-L defended her service choice to teach first-year undergraduate students how to search for books instead of databases by highlighting her role as an information expert and educator:

For the majority of students, who will not go on to do graduate level scholarly research, learning how to find books will be much more useful to their future information needs than using library databases . . . It won't be long until students just purchase databases directly with their technology fees, bypassing libraries entirely.

This commenter justified her choices by relying on the service repertoire. She will provide the services her students require not just for their immediate information needs but also for their future information needs. The consequence of not providing this kind of service was bleak for the profession, as it could soon be bypassed and replaced by technology. Because ICT-related changes may make libraries, and presumably librarians, obsolete, librarians needed to provide not only high-quality service but also relevant and timely services.

ICTs were positioned both as a threat to and as an opportunity for the profession. When positioned as a threat, ICTs were described as competition, a danger to core professional values, and a source for negative public perceptions of the profession:

Ask any librarian [a] question, and chances are very good that: 1) You will get an answer, and 2) It will be an honest answer unbiased by commercial concerns. As librarians, we know our patrons are our investors and our job is to look after their interest. That function becomes even more critical in dealing with all the inaccurate and misleading information on the Web. If we hope to continue to serve as honest brokers and offer a viable alternative to the Ask Jeeves and Webhelps of the world, then we must adopt the tools and strategies of our competitors and join our patrons on the Web. (Coffman and McGlamery 2000, 68)

This quote illustrates how librarians often used the service repertoire to highlight how their services, grounded in the core values of the profession, offered an alternative for information-seekers looking not only for high-quality information but also for “honest” and “unbiased” information—something their high-tech competitors could not offer. In this way, librarians used ICTs to position themselves as an essential service for not only their local patrons but anyone anywhere: “Increasingly, librarians are working on cross-functional teams with fellow professionals . . . as well as liaising with user groups to facilitate improved

access to and awareness about all forms and formats of information—desktops, libraries . . . anywhere really” (Khan 2003, 72).

When ICTs were described as an opportunity for the profession, librarians focused on how ICTs had changed the service activities of librarians. ICTs had placed a new emphasis on “online search skills, Web page design and maintenance, and the ability to troubleshoot hardware and software” (Saunders 2012, 399) and had made their day-to-day services more technology-focused: “basically [I explain] what the hell a database is and why [students] need to use it” (Hildy, academic librarian). Technology provided a way for librarians to position themselves and their services directly in the lives of their users: “Libraries need to embed their resources and expertise into the systems and tools students and faculty use in their daily lives” (Lewis 2007, 425). The purpose and intent of library services, however, had not changed as a result of technology. One participant, Olivia, who had over 35 years of work experience in special libraries, stated that although her work had become “very, very virtual,” meaning that clients no longer had to see her in person to receive help, the core of her work had not changed, as ICTs now provided “a different way of delivering services.” Similarly, a contributor to MEDLIB-L, in a thread discussing the possibility that technology was replacing librarians, stated: “Technology can free up librarians so they have more time to help people . . . But the LIBRARIAN will always be the most important resource in the library” (emphasis in original).

Librarians used the service repertoire to position themselves as technology experts in relation to users. The skills and expertise involved in traditional library services were described as an advantage that librarians had over users when using ICTs: “You’re expert at conducting the reference interview, during which you know how to coax even the most reticent patron into divulging exactly what it is that he or she is seeking. All of these skills will serve you well when you turn to the Internet for reference answers” (Wolinsky 2000, 35). If the librarian was an expert, then the user was a novice or amateur unaware of the true extent of her or his information needs, someone who did not have the skills to meet this need. Mary, an academic librarian participant, stated that her purpose as a librarian was “to send students into the real world with useful skills.” Unfortunately, her students were unaware of the vast information landscape to which they had access through the university library: “I get students coming to me asking for books at the research desk . . . they say ‘I need books on this topic’ and I go ‘can you use articles?’ . . . They equate research with books, especially the first year students.” It was her job to ensure that her students knew the difference between the usefulness of a book versus an article for their assignments, but also to ensure they had the necessary technology skills to live in the “real world.” For her, these useful skills were “[k]nowing how to use all these different technologies and how to engage in an online environment.” This lack of skill was not the fault of users; it was just further proof that clients needed librarians:

Part of what the people asking for the card catalog are doing is asking where their old competence went . . . The good libraries understand this and keep the old and rejoice in

the new and use both to do a better job of solving problems. Remember "The right book for the right person at the right time"? Well now we need to think in terms of "The right technology for the right problem at the right time." (PUBLIB contributor)

Helping users was the goal of librarians' service provision, whether the service was intended to help students learn the differences between a book and a journal article or to help them "solve problems." As can be seen in the preceding quote, the complexities of ICT-based services were not obstacles to providing services; they were opportunities to help and to serve.

Users and service

Librarians used service to define their relationships with users. Clients needed librarians not only to help them find information but also to do their jobs and to build communities:

The conversation we want to have now is "tell me about yourself. Tell me about your organization and the people that you're working with. How could the library support you? What kinds of skills and expertise do you bring? And how can we [work] together?" And I see that that's very much what a librarian does now in a community. (Emma, public librarian)

This sentiment was not limited to public librarians. Special and academic librarians also highlighted their roles in the research process: "Medical librarians support the healthcare team by working tirelessly to select essential online and print resources to meet their institutions [*sic*] medical and nursing point-of-care, research, and education needs" (MEDLIB-L contributor).

Often, however, making clients aware of the services and their value was difficult: "We all know that the big problem is getting them to come to us in the first place" (Kennedy 2004, 19). Not only was the service repertoire used to highlight how much clients needed the services librarians offered, but it was also used to highlight the perceived ignorance of clients regarding these invaluable and indispensable services. Teacher librarians, for instance, often highlighted how both students and teachers needed their help, especially in regards to information literacy (IL): "School and public libraries are perfectly positioned to push for and provide programs that will equip kids with the resiliency skills they need to overcome their hardships and become prosperous lifelong learners" (St. Lifer 2003, 13). But the provision of these vital skills was solely the responsibility of librarians: "Pamela . . . knows the responsibility to spread information literacy is hers alone" (Whelan 2003, 51).

The repertoire positioned librarians as alone and misunderstood. The result of this was that users would not get the full benefit of the service librarians had to offer:

I find that the full time faculty are pretty apathetic about IL . . . I see from the students who come for reference help that they are in ****dire**** need of IL assistance. Something I notice though is that they tend to emulate their instructors' attitude about the library, and so they don't think they need the instruction. (ILI_L contributor, emphasis in original)

In this example, there are two user groups that the librarian is positioning herself or himself against: students and faculty. Students were in “dire” need of IL instruction. Without the help of the librarian, these students may not be successful in their academic endeavours. In relation to students, this librarian is positioning herself or himself as important and her or his services as necessary. But perceived faculty attitudes were impeding the librarian’s ability to provide students with this vital IL instruction. In relation to faculty members, this librarian positioned herself or himself, her or his service, and the library she or he worked for as being misunderstood. The implication in the quote is that if the faculty members did fully appreciate and understand the IL instruction the librarian offered, then students would be receiving the full benefit of the services they were in need of.

Professionalism through service

As discussed above, the service repertoire was often linked to the change repertoire. The changes brought about by the economy, policy, technology, and user expectations were perceived to have a real and potentially negative impact on the future of the profession: “Our profession is under daily threat of extinction” (Nesi 2012, 18). Service was understood as a way to give the profession relevance and value in the face of change: “And when librarians deliver excellent services and resources, they make a difference for their users—they are valuable. In truth, . . . [it’s] not about *looking* valuable; it’s about *being* valuable” (Oakleaf 2011, 206, emphasis in original). Not only were the services librarians offered tangible, but in the service repertoire, through the provision of service, librarians’ professional worth and value was also tangible. In this way, the service repertoire is linked to the professionalism repertoire. The professionalism repertoire was employed by librarians when they wanted to foreground their social status as professionals. The provision of high-quality service was often posited as the best way to demonstrate librarianship’s professionalism:

The time and expertise of a professional are an increasingly precious commodity, especially at a time when everything and everything’s brother are on the internet. Helping readers pick and choose from the options available to them will continue to be one of the most valuable services librarians can offer—and that’s true from elementary school to corporate knowledge management. It is about quality. (Kniffel 2005, 29)

The above quote hints at two of the main purposes of the professionalism repertoire as it relates to the service repertoire. First, as professionals, librarians will go above and beyond to meet their clients’ information needs regardless of the information environment in which they work. Second, it grounds service in the core values of the profession. The first use of the repertoire can be observed in how Jillian, a special librarian participant, distinguished between her work and the work of her paraprofessional co-workers. She described the work of her co-workers as “more . . . technical” and distinguished her professional “efforts” by highlighting her own and other librarians’ willingness to go “to a lot of trouble to help our clients to dig into the problem.” This willingness to provide

service, and not simply perform technical tasks, was what separated the professional from the library technician. The purpose of the repertoires in this instance was to demonstrate the value of librarians to their users. Librarians do not simply perform a technical function; they offer a vital service—they are willing to “dig deep” and put “effort” into ensuring their clients’ satisfaction.

The second use of the repertoire focuses on the foundations of librarians’ professional service. In the quote from Kniffel (2005), service was described as a good based on the expertise and core values of the profession. Its purpose was to highlight the core values of the profession and provide meaning and intention to the services the profession offers. This use of the repertoire was also observed in the speech of the interview participants. In a similar manner to Jillian, Erica, a public librarian, separated her public service activities from those of her paraprofessional co-workers. Although she was careful not to insult her co-workers’ abilities (“I’ve only been a librarian for 2 years, there’s some people who’ve been the library assistant for 20 years and they have [a] really . . . great skill set and history and wisdom that you don’t want to discount”), she did distinguish her work from theirs by highlighting her professional values: “I’m often modelling that core value [to just try to share what I have and to use that as a resource for people] and bringing people back to that . . . I find a lot of library assistants stuck at . . . customer service, it’s a very retail mind-set.” Erica separated herself from her co-workers by using the professionalism repertoire to highlight her professional mind-set, based in the core values of librarianship, over the paraprofessional’s retail mind-set. The difference between these two perspectives was not the activities of service, as it was for Jillian, but the understanding and thought that went into the service: “[It’s] bringing those underpinnings . . . and attaching them to the public service.” Although she acknowledged the experience and wisdom of her co-workers, her grounding in the core values of librarianship placed her in a position to model professional attitudes and values to her much more experienced colleagues. Grounding services in the profession’s core values discursively functioned as a way to highlight the uniqueness and importance of librarians as professionals to users. The consequence of not grounding services in professional core values was the demise of the profession. Both Bell (2005) and Alexander (2005) warned librarians that if they did not ground their services in values such as intellectual freedom and user education, they would either accept “a position of being less than professionals” (Alexander 2005, 41) or sacrifice “the only thing that differentiates [them] in the age of Google” (Bell 2005, 68). Here the service, change, and professionalism repertoires are being employed to offer a sense of urgency to the authors’ predictions. Services must change to meet user expectations “in the age of Google.” However, these new services must be grounded in professional values to ward off professional irrelevance.

Discussion

Service is a professional practice that allows librarians to meet their professional goal of helping clients and to demonstrate to users the relevance of the profession. Discursively, service offers librarians something tangible in which to ground

their identities. In this way, it is similar to the library-as-place repertoire. In the library-as-place repertoire, librarians highlight the relationship they have with the library—a place that often has a positive association for most library users (Jackson and Hahn 2011; Massis 2012; Maxwell 2006). This repertoire can be clearly seen in the speech of interview participant Nathan, a public librarian. Nathan liked to be known by his clients as “Nathan from the library.” He stated that the association with the library as place was a deliberate choice on his part because “when you walk through the streets, people say ‘Hey it’s that guy from the library, it’s Nathan from the library.’” By directly connecting himself to the library, Nathan hoped to evoke those happy feelings in his clients even when he’s “kind of stern with some” of them. The library served as a marker for his professional identity to both Nathan and his patrons. By grounding his identity in the library as place, Nathan was able not only to use the discursive resources available to him as a professional but also to employ the broader societal understandings of the library as place. The service repertoire functioned in a similar manner. Anna, a public librarian participant, liked to inform her clients: “Well, you know that catalogue . . . you log into? That’s me.” Anna’s assertion that she was the catalogue served a similar purpose as Nathan’s assertion that he was “from the library.” Instead of evoking the happy space of the library, Anna evoked the usefulness of the online catalogue as an ICT-based information service. By comparing herself to the online catalogue, she employed broader societal discourses around technology and professionalism to ground her identity. Talja (2005) found implicit understandings of technology were employed when people talked about their technological skills and competencies. Technology was useful and valued by her participants, and as a result norms around technological skills and competencies developed. When Anna used the catalogue as a marker for her professional identity, she evoked similar norms and values of technology. At the same time, she situated her identity in the discourses of professionalism. By using words that are strongly grounded in the language of librarianship, like *catalogue*, Anna highlighted the specialist knowledge required to create and maintain the catalogue. And by equating herself directly with the catalogue, the same value and service the catalogue offered her users were discursively transferred to her. Like the catalogue, and technology and professionals broadly, she is useful and valuable. The library-as-place repertoire was less prominent in the language of special librarians. Instead, special librarians relied heavily on the service repertoire in their speech and texts: “Our roles need to CONTINUE to expand. Not just stay in the library. Add media, and possibly explain your help with research . . . We have to continue to be creative” (MEDLIB-L contributor, emphasis in original). The recommendation to “add media” took precedence over “explain your help with research” in the preceding quote. By adding media, the librarian was urging the readers to implement a useful service that would actually help users and improve the professional position of librarians. This focus on service functioned as a way to highlight the usefulness of librarians in helping their organization or client groups meet their goals and work objectives. Simply explaining

librarians' roles in the research process would not contribute to either helping clients or furthering the profession's status.

Users were often at the heart of the service repertoire. This focus on users reiterated some of the discursive functions of the insider/outsider repertoire. In this repertoire, librarians focused on their relationships with their users—especially in relation to technology. Users were discursively placed in a needs-based relationship with librarians in this repertoire. Librarians were technology insiders, while users were the outsiders. The insider/outsider repertoire can be seen in this comment from PUBLIB: “In a day and age when discount store clerks, laborers and fast food service workers have to apply for jobs online, we’re a vital link in the local employment picture.” By describing users as “discount store clerks, laborers and fast food service workers” users are discursively positioned as non-professionals and outsiders. Librarians, in contrast, are a “vital link,” making them the insiders. As non-professional outsiders, users are positioned as in need of the “linking” services that librarians offer. By referring to librarians (“we’re”) and not libraries as the vital link, the services that librarians offer, and not just the technological tools the library houses, are emphasized. As illustrated in the preceding example, in the service repertoire, users were positioned as being in need of the information services librarians provide but also ignorant of the services librarians offered. Without the help of librarians, these users would not meet their organizational, educational, or even recreational information needs. Users therefore need librarians. Fortunately, librarians will go above and beyond to meet these needs with high-quality services based in the core values of librarianship.

The insider status that librarians gave themselves in the insider/outsider repertoire was often accompanied by a sense that librarians were outsiders when it came to recognition from their clients and the public at large. This recognition was particularly important as librarians needed it to maintain their sense of professional value. For some librarians, recognition was so important that without it they feared they would cease to exist. On the e-mail discussion lists, recognition by others was a regular topic of discussion, particularly in regards to funding requirements and technology. It was hoped that users and other stakeholders, such as vendors and administrators, would see the value and expertise that librarians brought to their work and, as one commenter stated, “finally get it.” This outsider status for librarians was also evident in the service repertoire. As discussed above, when positioned as insiders, librarians created and provided high-quality services for their users. In addition to not understanding their own information needs, users were described as being ignorant of librarians' services because they had inaccurate perceptions of the profession. Tina, a teacher librarian participant, directly blamed the Marian the Librarian stereotype for these misperceptions: “I think the public still has that idea . . . of like Marian the Librarian . . . Many of them are untrained and they do . . . the best they can, and some of them are excellent. But they don't know what I do.” Tina positioned herself as an outsider in this statement. Not only were her users unaware of her skills, expertise, and services (“what I do”), but they were ignorant of her professional value as a result of inaccurate stereotypes. At the same time, Tina maintains in a paradoxical way

the outsider position of her clients. Even though her professional status and value were not being recognized, her patrons still required her services. Her users were positioned as wilfully ignorant of her important work and reliant on their own inexpert search skills (“they do . . . the best they can”). In the service repertoire, librarians do more than hope their clients will “finally get it” and recognize their professional value. By providing high-quality services, librarians wanted to show their clients that their assumed perceptions about information professionals were wrong and to demonstrate the true value of “solid, reliable—dare I say library-quality—material” (Quint 2004, 7). If users did not realize the value of librarians’ services, then the profession was under threat. Librarians therefore also need their users to validate and ensure their continued existence.

Concluding thoughts

This study examined the interpretive repertoires that librarians used to construct their professional identities. Although the focus was on the most prominent repertoire—service—the repertoires of change, professionalism, library as place, and insider/outsider were also examined.

The service repertoire could be seen in librarians’ use of descriptors for the work they did and the focus on users, communities, and other professions in their text and speech. The repertoire positioned them in opposition to popular perceptions and misunderstandings, not only through their actions and service, but also through the use of broader societal understandings surrounding technology and professionalism. The prominence of the service repertoire in the text and speech of librarians is, in some ways, not unexpected. It is cited as a core value by both the American Library Association and the Canadian Library Association. The *American Library Association* (2004, under “Service”) states, for example: “We provide the highest level of service to all library users.” It is also a key feature of professionalism. O’Doherty (2002, 217–18) described professional service as being “traditionally measured in terms of its exactitude and rigour where one expects the application of rules and procedures, tried and tested methods, and the support of a foundation of knowledge and expertise.” Librarians used the service repertoire not only to tell users and stakeholders about the profession’s service but to demonstrate the value of the profession by offering valuable, timely, and relevant services. There is a value to being identified as professional, with benefits ranging from social recognition and prestige to monetary compensation (Dent and Whitehead 2002; Watson 2002). Librarians wanted their profession to be understood by others as valuable, as well as realizing the social rewards that came along with this recognition. And, as professionals, librarians had a responsibility to serve their clients using their expertise, core values, and the most up-to-date technologies. The service repertoire focused on the relationship librarians had with their users. In it, users were given a powerful position. Librarians’ professional *raison d’être* was helping their clients meet their information needs, but users were positioned as being oblivious of librarians’ services. Without this recognition, not only were the services that librarians designed not used, but the profession itself was in jeopardy.

By focusing on how librarians describe their profession, attention can be drawn to how librarians themselves construct librarianship. A deeper understanding of the professional identity of librarians illustrates how librarians understand their roles, the services they offer, and what they themselves feel their place is in society. The service repertoire functioned as a way for librarians to highlight their professional worth, technological expertise, core values, and uniqueness to clients and stakeholders. These findings have implications for both the study and practice of librarianship. There is a body of literature in LIS that examines how information users are framed by both information practitioners and information scientists (Hedemark, Hedman, and Sundin 2005; Olsson 2009; Tuominen 1997). This research contributes to this literature by exploring not only how information professionals conceive of users but how they conceive of themselves. It highlights the fact that the professional practices of librarianship are co-constructed by librarians and their users. What the analysis reveals can perhaps impact the practice of librarianship by echoing past calls for reflexivity on the parts of librarians (Olsson 2009; Tuominen 1997). It could encourage practitioners to ask questions about why they are designing information services in particular ways, which user groups they are targeting in the marketing materials, and what messages they are sharing in such materials.

Finally, this study opens up further questions around professional identity. What, for instance, is the role of other identities, like gender or race, in the professional identities of librarians? How has the service repertoire shifted over time to accommodate customer services discourses commonly found in retail and business contexts?

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