



A communication system approach to the problem of public library legitimacy



Michael M. Widdersheim^{a,*}, Masanori Koizumi^b

^a School of Information Sciences, University of Pittsburgh, 135 North Bellefield Avenue, Pittsburgh, PA 15260, United States

^b Faculty of Library, Information and Media Science, University of Tsukuba, 7D Building (Room 310), 1-2 Kasuga, Tsukuba, Ibaraki 305-8550, Japan

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 26 December 2015

Received in revised form 11 May 2016

Accepted 10 January 2017

Available online 25 January 2017

ABSTRACT

Public library systems intersect with both public and private spheres of social life, but how they negotiate public legitimacy and private influence remains a mystery. To better understand this problem, this study adopts a communication system approach. Using qualitative content analysis, this study examines data from three US public library systems. This study analyzes how private actors communicate with and through public library systems by parsing the signals into components: transmitter, receiver, medium, and message. The resulting signals form two dimensions: the Public Sphere dimension, where private actors govern, legitimate, and use the library, and the Private Sphere dimension, where private actors exchange personal services and exert economic power. A view of public and private signals in interaction reveals how public legitimacy is threatened and how public library systems can mitigate these threats. This study reveals how public/private conflicts in public libraries arise and how they might be resolved.

© 2017 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Public libraries mediate between public and private spheres of sociality. To some extent they must reflect the interests and values of their constituents—their publics. In their public roles, public libraries act as meeting places and as spaces for debate and dialogue. They are tax-supported with few exceptions, and they often receive public legitimation in the form of referenda votes or community rallies. On the other hand, public libraries also serve private information needs. In their private roles, public libraries draw funding from for-profit businesses, act as vendors that sell merchandise, and sponsor programming, often related to job-seeking. In some cases, the distinction between public and private spheres seems clear, distinct, and without conflict. In other cases, however, the two sides—public and private—blur together. This is especially true in environments fraught with decreasing library budgets, leading to cases where information technologies of globalized private businesses creep into public services, and public libraries take on business-like practices tied to a particular perspective. This imbricated nature of public libraries might suggest that private influence weakens the legitimacy afforded to public libraries by their constituents. That is, library systems may reflect limited, private influences rather than shared, public ones. How, then, do public libraries negotiate this dilemma? How do they maintain their publicness despite private influence?

Ambivalence about the publicness of public library systems has been expressed in library literature over the past two decades (see Widdersheim and Koizumi (2016) for a detailed review). For instance, Webster (1995) suggested that, owing to their public funding and accessibility, “the public library network is arguably the nearest thing we have in Britain to an achieved public sphere” (pp. 111–112); yet, he also expressed concerns about pay-per services and their effects on public participation and access. Similarly, in their ethnographic accounts of public spaces in Toronto and Vancouver central libraries, Leckie and Hopkins (2002) claimed that the public sphere in public libraries was “co-opted” by private interests, including corporate business practices (p. 357). Likewise, Buschman (2003) argued that as “democratic public spheres,” libraries are “disseminators of rational, reasoned, and organized discourse,” “sources of verifying or disputing claims,” and “spaces for the inclusion of alternative views of society” (pp. 120–121). He also famously claimed that private influences “dismantle” the public sphere in libraries (Buschman, 2003, 2012). Moreover, Stevenson (2016) argued that the partnerships by Ontario public libraries with and emulation of private sector entities threaten the democratic roles of public libraries. She observed that they “design services and establish organizational cultures that often contradict the profession’s historic ethos of public service” (p. 1). These authors all question how library systems negotiate public and private roles. From this existing research it is clear that questions of publicness are important to people in the public library world, but if it is the case that public library systems privilege private interests over public values and concerns, and if they do not support an undistorted, non-biased intellectual

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: mmw84@pitt.edu (M.M. Widdersheim).

commons, then it also seems that the public legitimacy of public library systems is in doubt (Kann-Christensen & Pors, 2004).

Existing literature suggests that a fundamental problem exists in public library systems. This is the problem of how public libraries negotiate public and private spheres of life. While this problem has been identified by the studies noted above, its underlying structure and causes have not yet been explained in detail. Buschman (2003), for example, offers a profound critique of prevailing practices in libraries, and he claims that private influences corrode the public sphere in libraries. Despite these criticisms, however, he offers no solutions. Without a theory or model of what the public sphere in public libraries is, and what the private sphere in public libraries is, and how the two relate, it cannot be made clear why a public/private dilemma exists or how it might be resolved. Such an explanation needs to be developed.

Previous literature is correct to indicate a tension between public and private, but existing literature also frames the problem of public and private in confused ways. For example, public and private are portrayed dichotomously, as two mutually exclusive and opposing sides. This framing is evident in claims such as “the democratic public sphere roles of libraries...have no place in the vision of the library as the instant-satisfaction, fast-food equivalent of information” (Buschman, 2003, pp. 120–121). In fact, this framing of the public/private problem presents a false dilemma. Certainly, the two conceptions of library service emphasize different values, but even if Buschman is correct that library culture has fundamentally changed since the 1990s, it does not follow that the public sphere in libraries is no longer observable. It is clear that in public libraries both public and private spheres of sociality co-exist. The problem that must be resolved is not how the public can triumph over the private, but how they can exist in balance.

Another confusion in the framing of the public/private problem is the notion that as the private sphere role of public libraries grows or increases, the public sphere role declines. This framing suggests that public and private spheres share an inverse relationship: as the private sphere increases or dilates, the public sphere decreases or constricts. Webster (1995, p. 112), for example, observes the decline of the public roles of public libraries with “commercialization,” a term that suggests an increasingly private character over time (p. 112). This framing of the problem—the rise of private with the fall of public—is oversimplified and it is without warrant. Certainly there are aspects of library culture that conflict with the values of the profession, but claiming that the public and private spheres exist inversely requires an explanation: Which is the independent variable, public or private? Which is dependent? What explains the relationship? In fact, there is evidence to the contrary of the “inverse” thesis that suggests that the two sides wax and wane in tandem. Famously, Habermas (1989) located the rise of the public sphere in early modern Europe with the rise of mercantile capitalism. Zaret (2000) confirmed this thesis. The problem, then, may not be that the private dismantles the public, but that certain forms of private culture or influence present problems for publicness. The challenge is to identify these interferences in a nuanced way supported by evidence.

This study explains how public libraries can remain public in a normative sense. The central research question is: How do public libraries balance public legitimacy with private influence? By attempting to identify and describe the abstract modes of sociality that manifest in public libraries, this study represents a step toward answering if and how public libraries have shifted toward private interests and away from public ones since the 1990s. This is only a first step in an ongoing research process, and as such some questions related to history and dynamics remain unaddressed. For example, this study does not address how public libraries have changed over time, whether they have become more private or less public. It does, however, chart a path that could be followed in future work in order to address historical questions. The significance of this research is its development of conceptual tools and a conceptual framework that could be used in future work to address historical questions.

2. Theoretical framework

Public legitimacy and private influence both originate from private actors. Legitimacy is defined as the quality of normative validity that is attributed to laws or systems and derived from deliberation by those affected. Influence is defined as social or economic power that bypasses processes of communication and is derived through control of capital, broadly defined.

Legitimacy and influence are sources of power that affect how laws and systems form. They are powers wielded by private actors. In the case of library systems, public governance ensures that the library systems reflect public values and interests—that the system is legitimate. Influence affects the material survival of the library. According to this framework, private actors coordinate social actions in a dual way. On the one hand, private actors use influences such as money, power, and strategic language to steer behavior in instrumental ways. On the other hand, they use reasons and open communication to come to a shared, public understanding. It is this public use of reason that links publicity with legitimacy. How are legitimacy and influence balanced by library systems? How might these transmissions of power conflict?

To answer these questions, private actors must first be distinguished from the library system. A framework must then be developed to analyze the signals that private actors and libraries exchange. In order to understand how public and private spheres of social life intersect in public libraries, there must first be a way to tease them apart. In order to make these distinctions, there must be a framework with criteria to distinguish public from private.

The definition of private actors borrows from Habermas's (1989, p. 30) traditional formulation of bourgeois society (see Table 1). Private actors constitute a private realm that is separate from the public authority of the state. Within the private realm, the private sphere of commodity exchange and social labor is distinguished from the public sphere, where private actors engage in discourse regarding politics, economics, art, and literature. In this view, public and private spheres are “the preserve of private people” (p. 30), and politics is at the heart of the “public sphere constituted by private people” (Habermas, 1989, p. 30).

In this study, private actors are defined according to this model. Several kinds of actors are included within this category: civil society individuals and groups; voluntary associations; local clubs and club members; third-sector organizations; charities; and foundations. In line with the meaning of *Gesellschaft*, or civil society, also included are private sector corporations, businesses, and business people.

For the purposes of this study, actors such as library workers and public officials are not considered private actors. Library workers, as well as any library-related infrastructure, services, and programs, are considered part of library systems. Actors formally associated with the state administration are largely excluded from this study. Investigation of the relationship between public libraries and the state administrative system is therefore beyond the scope of this study because it occupies a “sphere of public authority,” one that is neither public sphere nor private sphere.

Table 1

A schema of bourgeois society. The private sphere on the left consists of civil society, commodity exchange, and families. (reproduced from Habermas, 1989, p. 30)

Private realm		Sphere of public authority
Civil society (realm of commodity exchange and social labor)	Public sphere in the political realm Public sphere in the world of letters (clubs, press)	State (realm of the “police”)
Conjugal family's internal space (bourgeois intellectuals)	(market of culture products) “Town”	Court (courtly-noble society)

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/5123919>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/5123919>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)