

Research Agendas and Time: Persistence and Change in the Profession's Questions

John M. Budd
School of Information Science & Learning Technologies
University of Missouri
303 Townsend Hall
Columbia, MO 65211
Email: buddj@missouri.edu
Phone: 573-882-3258
[Corresponding author]

Denice Adkins
School of Information Science & Learning Technologies
University of Missouri
303 Townsend Hall
Columbia, MO 65211
Email: adkinsde@missouri.edu

Abstract

In the late 1980s the Office of Library Programs sponsored a project intended to develop a research agenda for the field of librarianship. A detailed set of questions was stated. While more recent agendas have been created, it is an open question whether there is any consistency over time or among the expressed agendas. The proposed paper addresses that question.

Where do research questions come from? Ideally individual inquirers develop the ideas into which they delve, but every researcher looks to others for conceptual assistance. This paper explores the nature and content of research questions that are recommended for library and information science over the years. At times entire fields of study develop (or have developed for them) research agendas. In 1986-1987 a series of four meetings were held under the auspice of

the Office of Library Programs of the United States Department of Education. The project, “Issues in Library Research: Proposals for the 1990s,” included investigation of contemporary issues related to library and information science. A sizable group of participants took part in the eighteen-month-long project; one outcome was a set of critical papers that examined the major issues that were identified as a result of the investigation (*Rethinking*, Volume II, 1988). A (brief) companion publication summarized the research agenda that emanated from the project.

The issues identified included:

- Policy issues
- Access to information
- Organizing, indexing, and retrieving materials
- Role of the public services librarian
- Library funding and economics
- Information users and needs (*Rethinking*, Volume I, p. 3)

The issues present no surprises; in fact, they could apply to research into libraries and librarianship at just about any point in their histories. The project identified more specific questions to be addressed by research endeavors, though. The questions were informed by the set of papers that resulted from the participants’ deliberations. For example, Louis Vagianos and Barry Lesser wrote, “The information marketplace is in the midst of a period of profound change, a transformation of a scope and scale unseen since the invention of the printing press” (*Rethinking*, Volume II, p. 9). The influence of the essay is not so much in the expression of change, but in the identification of an “information marketplace.” Questions expressed at the time included: “What is the impact of fees upon access for public libraries and academic

libraries?” “Are the structure, organization and delivery of information influenced or decided more by aggregates of users (e.g., professional firms, businesses, citizen organizations) than by individuals as users (e.g., parent, student, private citizens)?” “Can a cost benefit/effectiveness library model be constructed?” “How can we measure the cost to society and to the individual of illiteracy and of the inability to use information successfully?” “Should librarians try to ‘add value’ to the information they give?” Granted, these are only select examples illustrating the “marketplace” notion; the extent to which they continue to obtain is an open question (it is, in fact, researchable).

In more recent times there have been a number of calls for, and formulations of, research agendas. Several of these agendas concentrate rather narrowly on particularly aspects of the profession or its institutions. One example of such a focused agenda is that presented by David Lankes (2005) on digital reference research. He (2005) says that a research agenda should consist of:

1. A definition of digital reference
2. A central, driving question
3. A series of lenses, or approaches to the central problem (p. 321)

The usefulness of clear and concise definitions for the areas to be addressed cannot be overstated. Even with a much broader and more ambitious agenda the importance of defining problems environments, technologies, social interactions, etc. is undeniable. The addition of a central driving question is less common to the articulation of agendas; more are open to an array of questions or problem statements. An underlying assumption of the other agendas may be that there is no one, single, and unique question.

Another example that is narrowed to a topic (and even an environment) is that of Hernon and Schwartz (2008). They provide an agenda that deals with leadership in academic libraries. As does Lankes, they begin with a definition of leadership from which they can proceed. The agenda for which they (2008) argue embraces the components of planning, goal setting, evaluation, and reporting (p. 247). The elements include sub-units that concentrate on the library, engagement beyond the library (as they both affect organizational culture), and developing talent. It becomes readily apparent that, while the initial focus of the agenda seems narrow, it is quite sweeping insofar as it covers most managerial function as seen through leadership. Some of the specific agendas emanate from associations. For example, the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) formulated a research agenda several years ago (2003). This set of issues was intended to update one developed in 1980. “The *Research Agenda for Library Instruction and Information Literacy* is organized into four main sections: Learners, Teaching, Organizational Context, and Assessment. Each section poses general questions with the goal of encouraging those interested—practitioners, researchers, and students alike—to conduct research around these important areas” (p. 480). Numerous specific questions related to each section are articulated.

Some more sweeping research agendas have been proposed in the last several years. Perhaps the most noteworthy have been suggested by Wayne Wiegand. In 1999 he published the article, “Tunnel Vision and Blind Spots,” in which he critiqued the directions of library and information science (LIS) research. Later, he (2003) argued for specific attention to the library as place and to reading; he stated that LIS could draw upon the field American Studies as a source for approaches to inquiry. In a broader vein, Gerald Benoit (2002) recognized that the prevailing

logical-empirical approach to research in LIS has been fruitful, but it could be augmented by inclusion of communicative action, as Jürgen Habermas conceives it.

The foregoing are only a few examples of more recently articulated research agendas; they demonstrate some key departures from the agenda of the 1980s (and may include disparities among themselves). Not only are technological possibilities fundamental different today, but ideas of what research is and what it can accomplish can be altered. There are some similarities, though, and the proposed paper will explore in detail what has remained unchanged over time and what has changed.

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