It Only Hurts When I Flame: Civility Rights vs. Civil Rights on the Information Superhighway

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Librarianship: An Historical Setting for Conversation

The current gender and language debates represent in part old battles fought on new ground. The etiquette of letter-writing was surely an antecedent, or at least a corollary, to the current discussion of gender equality in academic discourse. Gender etiquette in letter-writing is now totally relegated to the canon of the arcane, although my mother's 1945 copy of Emily Post contained an enigmatic section entitled "The Letter No Woman Should Ever Write." That letter, of course, was the letter in which a woman expressed her true feelings to a man. Needless to say, such social conventions had parallels in academe and in business life. Women rarely said what they really had to say to men in the public sphere, although at home, they often had the last word. Nevertheless, they managed to achieve remarkable professional feats in spite of men, and were even subject to limited veneration of a chivalric, some would say chauvinistic, variety. In the South, where Victorian conventions prevailed long after they had disappeared elsewhere, female librarians ruled by indirection and what was vaguely known as "southern charm." For all our professional forebears, however, socially prescribed gender roles, and the relationship between men and women were never the monolithic confections that most conventional historical accounts would have us believe.

Frances Newman, for example, an Atlanta library school graduate of 1912 who later achieved considerable literary prominence before her premature death in 1928, had frank contempt for the female seminary atmosphere which prevailed at the Carnegie Library of Atlanta and its school, and she peopled her last novel, a roman clef entitled Dead Lovers Are Faithful Lovers (1928), with thinly-veiled portraits of the Atlanta Library Director, Tommie Dora Barker, library school Principal Delia Foreacre Sneed, and Assistant Librarian Susie Lee Crumley. Her work has been rediscovered by writer Elizabeth Hardwick and historian Anne Firor Scott, and the academic industry has recently claimed Newman as a proto-feminist for her derision of the oppressively female, desiccated atmosphere of the library school. Significantly, Newman describes the Barker character, therein named Miss Joma Currier, as possessed of "the narrow head with the knot of hair whose color suggested a cup of tea made from leaves which had been brewed the day before, and whose angle proved Miss Currier's realization that her world trusted the virtue of any custom which had happened to coincide with its own youth." In "cautious," "dull brown" words which had been "dipped in potassium cyanide," Miss Currier pronounces to a staff meeting that `You remember that a novel is considered immoral if it makes vice attractive, or if it separates an act from its consequences" -- whatever that means (p.179, 186). Although Newman's female protagonist seemingly finds the dangers of a reckless liaison with a married man preferable to the dubious rectitude exemplified by Miss Currier, Miss Currier's real-life counterpart was in fact the embodiment of bureaucratic protocol and decorum - - the "male" business ethic personified.

A non-fictional example of female rebellion more pertinent to the subject of language can be found in the case of Edna Bullock, an 1894 graduate of The Library School at Albany, who in 1901 became Secretary of the Nebraska Public Library Commission. Bullock was interrupted in her attempts to win over her all-male board of

trustees to modern library practice by a letter from her former library school principal, Mrs. Salome Cutler Fairchild, who served as shadow and chief amanuensis for Melvil Dewey for many years and was even more efficiency-minded than he was about language (if that is possible), though she preferred conventional spelling. "Dear Miss Bullock," she began, You understand so fully that I believe in you that you will allow me to point out a tiny blemish on your State Fair Circular dated Sept 1 [1902]. It is the use of "will" instead of "shall" in the last line. The confusion of the two words is of course among the commonest things among very well-educated people, still, lack of conformity is noticed by those who have an eye for such things and I think librarians might just as well gain the respect of people by paying attention even to what may seem to them a trifle compared to the work itself. What do you think? Bullock, by no means content to bow graciously to encomiums from a library school principal ensconced in a New York university, gave her no quarter. She replied, I presume that when I tell you the truth of my opinion on "shall" and "will," you will regard me as more hopeless than ever. I was a born non-conformist and I believe in it. I am almost as much of an iconoclast about language as Mr. Dewey is about spelling. I believe that usage is what makes and unmakes language, and I believe that by far the greatest number use those two words interchangeably to a certain extent [. . .] I do not, however, use the two words interchangeably, and in the connection you mention, I used the word that expressed my meaning. I am afraid I can never be depended upon to do anything in the conventional way, and I will be honest enough to say that I shall not attempt to improve for fear of making a bad matter worse. I threw discretion to the winds when I learned in Albany to drop the "ue" from catalog &c. I am past praying for. There are two or three typographical errors in our report that I am sorry for. They are due to my iconoclastic tendencies in the matter of capitals, and the printer's inability to understand the same. So much for linguistic solidarity!

The story of how Caroline Hewins, the celebrated librarian and founder of children's services in Hartford, Connecticut, somehow mustered the temerity to raise her hand and ask a question of the men on the podium at the first ALA convention has been recounted many times: the early librarians have been variously reviled as passive handmaidens, or described almost exclusively in terms of a tightening marketplace in which men gradually gained ascendancy -- what is now known as the "glass escalator" effect. It would behoove all library historians to take stock of the context in which these female pioneers operated before casting aspersions on their lack of feminist vigor, or the masculine wiles of their male library leaders. Males were not the only anti-suffragists, and many men supported female suffrage. Queen Victoria, on the other hand, who for 62 years provided the model of female sovereignty and power to the entire world, implored Sir Theodore Martin in 1870 to

. . . enlist everyone who can speak or write to join in checking this mad, wicked folly, of `Woman's Rights,' with all its attendant horrors, on which her poor feeble sex is bent, forgetting every sense of womanly feeling and propriety. Lady _____ought to get a good whipping. It is a subject which makes the Queen so furious that she cannot contain herself. God created men and women different -- then let them remain in their own spheres.

Obviously, the lady would not have felt the whip for all the hardware in her underpinnings, or all the beading on her gown, but then again, this wasn't Singapore!

While the "Weaker Sex" debate in the columns of Library Journal in 1938 supposedly marked the first general discussion of women's equity issues among members of the association, clearly, the question of gender parity in librarianship was a part of the daily banter in library schools and libraries from the beginning, and particularly in the South. There, women's clubs were largely responsible for the formation of public libraries, women organized many academic libraries, and, outside the library, they generally promoted culture in the region. Even if males eventually received the position and salary of head librarian, female librarians often dismissed their efforts in informal communications. Whether they received official recognition, equal pay, respect or not, women ran the libraries.

Men braved the polite but treacherous southern female library establishment at their own peril, as Harold Brigham of the Cossitt Library in Memphis learned in 1930 when he was "bitterly" attacked from the floor of the Tennessee Library Association meeting by University of Tennessee's Mary Baker: at least part of his

troubles stemmed from the fact that he was a northerner and a newcomer to the region, and did not understand the affront to southern librarians of an "outsider" commenting on their regional association. The real source of the enmity, however, was a background struggle between Tommie Dora Barker of Atlanta and Mary Utopia Rothrock of Knoxville for dominance in an ALA-sponsored program for southern library development. Rothrock could also be a formidable opponent within ALA Council, and she was an entirely different type of leader than Barker: she was cherished by some colleagues for her lack of convention and inclination to take a drink in the back rooms with the boys and she was feared by others for her strong-minded and well-worded outbursts, most notable of which resulted in the dissolution of the ALA Library Work with Negroes Roundtable at the Hot Springs conference of 1923.

From my historical perspective, at least, certain women in librarianship were capable of channelling their anger in such a way as to give "the brute" a run for his money, but in the case of some of the southern librarians cited above, the limited but effective power which these women wielded resulted from a regional gender ideology which camouflaged tightly-held beliefs about region, race, and class. The greatest power struggles were not between men and women, but rather, between women and other women for control of limited professional turf. As Ed Holley once remarked, "the smaller the stakes, the bigger the fight."

The Current Chat

To return to the theme of this session, if we can think of scholarship, including journals, as written conversation or correspondence, as the earliest scientific journals, the Journal des Savans and the Philosophical Transactions, certainly were, the question of gender inequity in communication becomes clearer. For the past year, I have been serving on the ALA's Committee on the Status of Women, where I have learned that an increasingly greater number of men, and fewer women, are doing research on women's issues. To those familiar with the litany of multiple roles that female librarians often perform, their difficulty in obtaining research funds for leaves of absence, and all the other preconditions necessary for promotion in the ranks of academe, this comes as no surprise, but a feminist agenda is by no means a universal aspiration among female librarians, anyway. Perhaps we shouldn't worry. Women in librarianship are certainly capable of contesting the polemic of men. In recent history, one only has to consider the Michael H. Harris/Phyllis Dain debate on the nature of the public library, or the strong replies given to Harris' paper on women and fiction by Suzanne Hildenbrand and Phyllis Dain at the 1986 midwinter meeting. In this profession, at least among library educators and academic librarians who write, women possess powerful oratorical skills. Certainly, in any discussion of gender equity, they have the moral force of right on their side. The lack of consensus about the status of women in librarianship, however, should concern us: among the male librarians whom I surveyed several years ago, over 50 per cent denied that men had any advantage in professional advancement. It should also cause grave alarm to ACRL members that the core of our profession -- children's and school work -- is so consistently devalued or ignored in favor of work with a high-tech corporate profile. Obviously, indicators such as these will have a direct impact on higher education in the next
century, and higher education already has plenty of crises of its own.

The climate in higher education has some bearing on the emphasis given to communication on the electronic highway. For years now, reports have regularly bemoaned rising serials prices and their impact on academic library budgets, yet there are more journals, not less, than there were ten years ago. An increasing number of journals are now available in electronic form, and many are available only in electronic form. Thus, still more titles to acquire. Obviously, someone reads some of these journals, but no one reads all of them. It is already difficult for the specialist to stay abreast of publications in his or her own field. The electronic journal has not solved a problem, it has merely added more problems to the pyre. An analogous situation can be seen with CD-ROM indexes, which many academic libraries are acquiring in addition to hard-copy indexes to protect the backfile in case the subscription is canceled. While academic libraries thus far have survived multiple-format information proliferation in a variety of ingenious ways, there is still more information than anyone can digest. As Nicholson Baker suggested in his controversial The New Yorker article recently, the electronic information environment is not necessarily a panacea for the information glut, and digital information is not necessarily

easier to find. It is somewhat daunting to realize that we have been discussing the problem of exponential information expansion since at least the 1940s. When will academics quit publishing in the name of fame (or tenure, if you will?) so much stuff which nobody reads. Does the fact that we have still another "alternate format" really change the educational situation? Well, it saves more trees, but it does not necessarily improve more minds.

On the other hand, e-mail, bulletin boards, and listservs present a "publishing" environment in which a person's thoughts may potentially be considered value-free, without any regard for the gender, race, position, or private tastes of the writer involved. Obviously, there are security dangers from pornographic pirates, nosy hackers, and other uncouth, angry, sick people. At the other extreme, there are those who seek the same level of sensitivity and self-identification in "scholarly" or "business" electronic communication that they receive in a psychotherapy session or a support group, and these participants feel victimized when that illusion is shattered by a verbal "flame." On the whole, though, advantages outweigh disadvantages: as Deborah Tannen suggested in her recent article on men, women and computers in Newsweek, the internet environment encourages people who might otherwise be reticent, to express their feelings with a hitherto unparalleled degree of frankness.

Tannen also reports that women who have been offended by the rudeness of male internet messages have formed their own discussion groups where like-minded people can exchange information or views safely. Unfortunately, when these participants leave their machines to return to live interaction, they do not find their social or work conditions greatly altered; the hierarchial conventions of the large corporation, so prevalent in academe, have not been diminished by the machine. As we all know, women were pioneers in computer technology, and in their library applications. Most studies, however, continue to underline the "de-skilling" of women in the computer software industry, although they nevertheless continue to invent, program, and dream of new uses for their megabytes.

Clare Beck, in a paper entitled "Fear of Women in Suits," referred to the "androgynous" nature of library work. Perhaps our work is androgynous, and perhaps men in our profession behave generally better towards women than, say, lawyers or bankers do. Many of the males I surveyed in my paper on the male librarian spoke in terms of great respect and admiration for their female colleagues. A sizable proportion, however, reflected concerns about the effects of Equal Opportunity and Affirmative Action initiatives on their livelihoods. Obviously, men and women in librarianship still have a lot of talking to do to resolve these fears. Maybe, on the other hand, we don't want to resolve them. Is "vive la difference" our rallying cry, after all? Or will the electronic environment eventually erase our differences?

What I have observed in my limited participation in electronic discussion groups is that I am responding to a voice rather than to a gender, to an idea rather than a person. On the Gay Librarian listserv, for example, participants engaged in a discussion called "Barbie-Chat," a seemingly irrelevant, irreverent and delightful evocation of the news of the day told from the point of view of 1950s nostalgia -- a creative and clever frame for discussing both gay and lesbian initiatives, library issues, and events of the day. When some of the subscribers complained of the volume of "Barbie" messages they had to filter, and recommended that the discussion be terminated, the most vocal proponents for keeping Barbie on the wires were males. On the other hand, opponents had a point: who has got time to create and read all this stuff? I dropped off all listservs when I began spending three hours a day reading, digesting, and responding to some of it; my wonderful communications tool, which had put me in touch with hundreds of people all over the country, was beginning to contribute to my daily isolation and loneliness, and a tremendous backlog of work. At any rate, I was consoled by this listserv that lesbians and gay men, who can be terribly separatist in some situations, could communicate so freely, uninhibitedly, indeed, "androgynously," on the network. It is worth mentioning that when men or women became too graphic in an off-color way, or when they veered too far from the topic of discussion, they were usually brought into line by other participants, sometimes abruptly by a witty, campy "flame," more often gently by a nudging complaint. What's wrong with simple honesty? At what point does honesty become ruthless?

Finally, whatever else has been said here today, I think it is important to take note of the current thin-skinned and demoralized social context in which the information revolution is taking place. Academe now reflects the litigious and hypersensitive social context (witness the "politically correct" band wagon), surely a result for which the public holds it responsible. The very plurality of American voices makes common cultural values increasingly more perplexing to define, opinions more difficult to form and weigh, and a climate of consensus and civility more laborious to achieve. One becomes passive or paranoid for fear of giving offense, or beligerent for fear of not being heard. This environment has a direct corollary in the current topic of discussion on this panel. What is alarming to me is the disparity between the refinement of the topic we're discussing today, and the dehumanizing bureaucratic protocols in many academic environments, which both men and women accept as a matter of course.

In conclusion, the question of gender and communication on electronic networks concerns primarily the environment in which such communication takes place. In some disciplines, what we may observe is not so much the brutality of male speech as the deterioration of academic discourse. The obscurity of specialist language -- beyond given "definitions of the field" -- renders most academic discourse inacessible to students and useless to society. Certainly we should worry that some women and men feel alienated by the tactlessness of flamers. We should also worry that the sheer quantity of available information at our disposal may outstrip our ability to determine its significance. Of more fundamental importance to our profession, however, is why there is still any discrepancy at all in salary levels between males and females; why evidence of vertical stratification, sexual harassment, and discrimination persists; why discussion of gender issues have been confined for so many years to special interest groups such as this one; and why a clearly-defined feminist agenda in librarianship has been so slowly forthcoming.

As for communication, how sensitive do we need to be? Can't we get along? We now have the opportunity to re-learn the subtle art of conversation in electronic discussion groups, the lost art of letter-writing on e-mail, and the forgotten codes of civility on the information highway. The era of Civil Rights coincided with a redefinition of sexual mores, gender roles and the boundaries of common civility. While it is tempting to bemoan the loss of behavioral niceties, privacy, and traditional community, it is possible to embrace the cyberspace community, and marvel over the fact that, what was once unthinkable is no longer unutterable. In the words of a 1960s flower-power anthem, "we can talk about it now."

It will be many years before the gender wars can be settled by conventions of speech; I am a believer, however, in the premise that among the beneficiaries of women's liberation will be men, and that civility can be re-defined even as the back-handed habits of chivalry, brute force, and linear thinking are abandoned. With the educational outcomes at stake for tomorrow's college students, the imperative of such a result seems inevitable, and alternative scenarios --increasing elitism, factiousness, and conflict among a plethora of special interest groups -- can only be very dark indeed.