The Professionalization of a Calling: Mission and Method at the New York Library Club, 1885-1901

On June 13, 1885, Melvil Dewey circulated a letter to colleagues in Manhattan and Brooklyn inviting them to a meeting to consider “the desirability and practicability of an informal club of New York librarians” that would confer upon the “many matters in which knowledge of each others work and plans would result in co-operation greatly to our mutual advantage.” Later that month twelve librarians gathered at the Columbia College Library to organize the New York Library Club.¹ Founded at a critical point in the development of public libraries in the New York area, the club became an important local forum for exchanging ideas, debating methods and principles, and cooperating to advance library interests.

In 1885, the public library was still a relatively new and untried institution. The early meetings of the New York Library Club present in microcosm many of the fundamental issues that arose as librarianship emerged as a profession and shed light on the different ways that librarians attempted to address them. This first generation of public library workers was imbued with a sense of mission. They conceived the public library movement as a noble effort to bring good books into the homes of the masses. In pursuit of this ideal, however, they were confronted with the reality of a publishing industry that was producing an unprecedented quantity of printed works, often of indifferent quality, and a reading public that was more in interested popular fiction than in fine literature. Members of the New York Library used their meetings to explore methods of gaining intellectual control over this rapidly expanding bibliographic universe and of
influencing library users to read only the best books. It was from this interplay between ideal and practice, between mission and methods, that the modern public library and librarians’ sense of professional identity emerged.

**Libraries and Librarianship in New York City, 1885**

Contemporaries considered 1876 a landmark in the movement for public libraries in the United States. What one club president later called “the great library revival” began in October of that year when 103 men and women met near the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia to found the American Library Association (ALA). This first ALA meeting also coincided with the appearance of the first issue of what became the association’s official organ, *Library Journal*, and the publication of a monumental survey of libraries and librarianship by the U.S. Bureau of Education, *Public Libraries in the United States*. 1876 marked the ascendancy of a new kind of library. Early in the nineteenth century the term public library simply meant a collection that was ostensibly available to any member of the public, usually for an annual subscription or a membership fee. A public library then was public in the same sense that a railroad was a public conveyance or a tavern was a public house. By contrast, the ideal of the public library celebrated at the Philadelphia Conference emphasized service to the entire community, and focused on collections that circulated for free to the homes of rich and poor alike. This ideal was central to the development not just of libraries, but also to a sense of professional identity among librarians.

In 1876 New York City was considered a backwater of library development. The city boasted a number of extensive, non-circulating reference collections, most notably the library of the New-York Historical Society, founded in 1804; the Astor Library, bequeathed in John Jacob
Astor’s will and opened to the public in 1854; and the Lenox Library, created by James Lenox in 1870. All three, however, were frequently and rightly criticized as “book museums.” They served a narrow clientele of scholars and scholarly gentlemen and made no attempt to meet the library needs of the general public. In fact, at the founding of the New York Library Club the librarians of both the Lenox Library and the Historical Society declined to join, which the editor of Library Journal cited as further evidence that neither institution “has ever shown the slightest interest in any of the active library work of the past ten years.” The city also had several subscription libraries, the most prominent of which were the New York Society Library and the Mercantile Library Association. Subscription libraries charged an annual fee to borrow books, and therefore catered to a relatively exclusive readership. Even the Mercantile Library, which cost just five dollars per year, was well beyond the means of working class readers. When the founders of the ALA gathered in Philadelphia, most New Yorkers lacked, in the words of the New York Times, the “advantage of free and easy access to books as a means of moral and social culture.”

When the New York Library Club was founded nine years later, the situation had improved marginally. In 1880 a group of benevolent citizens incorporated the New York Free Circulating Library “to supply good reading to the public, especially those who are unable to provide themselves with suitable books either through poverty or ignorance.” The library began with a small collection on Bond Street in lower Manhattan and by 1885 had added another on Second Avenue. Until the end the nineteenth century it remained the largest and most influential public library in New York, eventually lending books for free from eleven branches in the poorest neighborhoods of the city. Another stimulus for library development was the arrival of Melvil Dewey. Dewey was instrumental in organizing the first ALA conference in 1876, then
served as the first editor of *Library Journal*, and in 1883 moved to New York as head librarian of Columbia College Library. Not only was he the founder of the New York Library Club, but his energy, vision, and enthusiasm influenced the direction of libraries and librarianship in the city long after he left it.

On June 13, 1885, the leading librarians in New York met at Columbia to organize the club. They elected an executive committee, and adopted a simple constitution written largely by Melvil Dewey. The New York Library Club was to meet five times a year in order to, “by cooperation and consultation, … increase the usefulness and promote the interests of the libraries of New York and vicinity.” It grew rapidly and by the end of the year already had more than sixty members, which at the time was probably a large proportion of the full-time librarians in the city. All types of libraries were represented. The organizational meeting, for example, included librarians from Columbia, the Astor, the Free Circulating Library, the Society Library, the Mercantile Library, and the library of the YMCA. What drew these men and women from very different institutions together was a deeply felt sense of the mission of libraries. The library mission was central to the founding of the New York Library Club and, in spite of dramatic changes in library collections and services in the latter years of the nineteenth century, it remained a critical part of the members’ professional identity.

The Library Mission

At the heart of that mission was the library’s role as an educational institution. It was for all librarians fundamental and self-evident. James Canfield, University Librarian at Columbia, was merely stating a truism when he said at the opening of the meeting in February 1900 that “those who are engaged in library work are charged with much of the education of the people.” The
educational mission of libraries in the late nineteenth century, however, stressed personal, moral improvement rather than practical instruction. The members of the library club rarely discussed, for example, library collections in terms of vocational education. Instead, convinced that good reading would inculcate sound morals, librarians sought to guide readers, particularly young readers, to the higher realms of literature. Since “ideas and ideals of life come from what they read,” reading good books would exert an “influence on cleanliness and truth-speaking, and on conduct, manners and morals.” This improvement and refinement of the individual reader would, in turn, ensure social stability and provide the foundation of a moral society. Members of the New York Library Club believed that in their mission “[lay] the safety of the community,” that their efforts to instill good reading habits would “help the whole nation’s future by establishing a high standard.”

This certitude that library work served a larger moral purpose is evident throughout the early history of the club. Even the most mundane matters were discussed with a fervent enthusiasm, and members frequently, purposefully drew upon the language of evangelicalism to describe the mission of librarianship. They quite unself-consciously referred to themselves as “minister[s] of light and purity, and goodness,” and confidently asserted that theirs was a calling “quite as serious as one to the ministry.” This fervent conviction that they were engaged together in a crusade for good reading and good morals imparted a sense of community that in turn was central to their sense of professional identity. At the New York Library Club and other library associations librarians were “stimulated by the example of earnest and cultured men and women, whose life-work is performed not as if it were a task set by a master, … but rather as if it were regarded as a high mission inspired by the finest ideals for the moral and intellectual advancement of mankind.” Aside from all of the practical work discussed and undertaken at the
meetings, the forging of this high-minded sense of professional community was an essential function of the club in its earliest years.

The promotion of public libraries was part of a wider universe of reform in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era and the librarians of the New York Library Club saw their work as a critical component of this larger movement. Melvil Dewey in particular self-consciously cast himself in the role of the reformer. When Dewey was a teenager he bought a pair of cufflinks, inscribed each with a capital ‘R’, “as a constant reminder that I was to give my life to reforming,” and vowed to “cast his whole influence on the side of right in every crisis.” As an adult, besides his work for libraries, he zealously crusaded for a variety of other causes, from prohibition to adult education to Dui’s system of simplified spelling. Richard Bowker, co-editor with Dewey of Library Journal and the first president of the New York Library Club, was a leading figure in political reform locally and nationally. He helped found the “mugwump” wing of the Republican Party that supported Grover Cleveland for president in 1884, was active in the National Civil Service Reform Association, and wrote a number of books on reform politics, including A Primer for Political Education (1886) and Electoral Reform (1889). In the minds of reformers like Dewey and Bowker, all of these efforts to improve the individual and cleanse the body politic were integrally related. Late nineteenth-century reform was for them an all-encompassing mission to uplift and purify American society.

In New York City in particular, support for public libraries and for political reform were closely linked. A proposal to incorporate a New York Public Library was on the agenda of the first two meetings of the library club. Members then voted to call a special public meeting for February 24, 1886 to discuss two state library bills written by the President of the Common Council Adolph Sanger and introduced in Albany the previous month. The first bill simply
provided for the creation of a public library “which shall forever stand as a monument of the homage paid by the people to self-culture.” Even though this simple act of incorporation was approved at the public meeting, it was nonetheless criticized in some quarters and was not fully supported by the New York Library Club.  

This part of the Sanger proposal was considered controversial only because on the twenty-two member board that was to oversee the library four elected officials were to serve *ex officio*: the mayor, the city comptroller, the president of the Board of Aldermen, and the president of the Department of Public Parks. Even this minimal representation for the City of New York, which would make annual appropriations for the library’s operating expenses, was considered a potential source of corruption. The mere presence of four city officials raised fears that the New York Public Library would “fall into the hands of politicians and be controlled by them,” that it would “share the fate of all other institutions in which politicians play a prominent part.”

That the mission of the public library might be undermined by presumably corrupt elected officials was an article of faith for the reform-minded members of the New York Library Club. For example, at a meeting ten years after Sanger introduced his library bill, members of the club were reminded that “to commit the custody of a library to political action is a dangerous experiment,” that to do so would subject the librarian “to the dictation of a party boss” and “the will of selfish politicians.”

The second library bill proposed by Adolph Sanger authorized the City of New York to raze the Croton Aqueduct and erect an imposing central library adjacent to Bryant Park on Fifth Avenue and Forty-Second Street. It was criticized by several members of the library club and was not endorsed at the public meeting in February. Instead, Melvil Dewey and the trustees of the New York Free Circulating Library lobbied for alternative legislation that permitted municipalities in the state of New York to appropriate tax monies to privately managed “free
circulating libraries” based upon their annual circulation. This bill, which passed in July of 1886, resulted in a dramatic increase in the number of public libraries in New York. By the time the City created the New York Public Library’s Circulation Department in 1901, local taxes provided most of the operating expenses for thirteen private institutions, including two, the Aguilar Free Library and the Cathedral Library Association, which, like the New York Free Circulating Library, operated networks of small libraries throughout Manhattan.26 With the passage of the Library Law of 1886, the members of the New York Library Club got precisely what they wanted: public funding for public libraries without any oversight from public officials.

Just as important, the law fostered the establishment of small neighborhood libraries. The members of the club by no means objected to the Sanger bill that would have created a large, centrally located reference library, but most felt there was a more urgent need for circulating branch libraries. With large, non-circulating collections for scholars at the Astor, the Lenox, Columbia College and elsewhere, there was a general consensus that the focus of library development should be on small lending libraries “spread like ganglionic centres over the city.”27 Branch libraries were emphasized because they were considered the most effective means of reforming and uplifting the poor. The public library mission, despite the club’s rhetoric regarding the education and refinement of society generally, was in large part an effort on the part of reform-minded middle and upper class librarians and philanthropists to remake “the masses” in their own image. Small neighborhood libraries were considered “far more potent than any large library can be” because in them librarians were presumably able to develop personal relationships with readers and thereby inculcate good reading habits more effectively.28 Members firmly believed that “one of the most important things that this club could do … would be to
advocate the establishment of branch libraries,” because “the only way to culture the working classes is to place books among them.”

The historiography of Gilded Age and Progressive Era reform once described philanthropic enterprises such as New York’s free circulating libraries as instruments of “social control.” Rather than high-minded, humanitarian enterprises, they were viewed as tools by which an anxious elite sought to regulate the behavior of an unruly underclass. Among library historians, Michael Harris in particular has been critical of the mission of public libraries in the late nineteenth century. There is certainly evidence in the minutes of the Library Club to support this interpretation. Terms such as “control,” “supervision,” and “direction,” were, in fact, used with some frequency in the club’s discussions. The word used much more often, however, was “influence.” For example, at a meeting in March 1889 in which members debated “How far should reading be controlled in libraries?”, the word “control” was hardly used at all. Instead, the general tenor of opinion was that “we should not dictate, but influence their choices.” This quest for influence is a key to understanding the early history of the New York Library Club and the professionalization of librarianship at the end of the nineteenth century. The mission of the public library inspired the members of the club to explore collectively the most effective means of influencing the reading habits and thereby reforming the morals of the city’s working classes.

By far the most frequently discussed topics at the club were libraries’ work with children and with the public schools. The membership created a Committee on Cooperation with the Schools, sent delegates to the annual convention of the National Education Association, and resolved to devote at least one meeting a year to “school work.” At a time when most children left school by the age of twelve, libraries were considered a critical supplement to the public school system. Librarians believed the library mission called upon them to teach those “who
leave school so early to love good books [and] let them know that these books may be had at the public library.”\textsuperscript{33} Moreover, work with the young was considered an especially effective means of influencing reading habits. It assured success in the long term not only because “the higher tastes acquired in youth will be enduring,” but also because every child was “potentially … a parent in the future.”\textsuperscript{34} This overriding concern for younger readers was also a critical component of the professionalization of librarianship. While discussions at the club frequently stressed the importance of involving teachers in the work of the library, members were nonetheless quick to point out that only “the librarian,” a professional who “has been in training … for the special work of selecting and suggesting best books” was prepared “to assist pupil or graduate in their reading.”\textsuperscript{35}

Work with young readers was the first specialty within public librarianship. It was considered the exclusive province of female librarians, since they were “attractive to children in manner and person,” and were naturally endowed with “patience and fairness and a genuine interest in children.”\textsuperscript{36} In fact, by the time the New York Library Club was founded in 1885, women predominated in public libraries generally, at least in rank and file positions. In New York City’s free circulating libraries, practically all of the librarians and many of the administrators were females.\textsuperscript{37} In the New York Library Club, although men were more likely to hold office and participate actively in the discussions, a majority of the members were women.\textsuperscript{38} One reason for this predominance was purely economic. The movement for public libraries began at roughly the same time as the founding of the pioneering institutions of higher learning for females. Large numbers of libraries with very small budgets coincided with large numbers of women from Vassar, Bryn Mawr, and elsewhere seeking professional careers rather than marriage. Public library administrators quickly learned that they could hire these women much
more cheaply than men.39 Perhaps more important, however, female librarians were deemed naturally suited to the library mission. Public libraries came to be seen as a natural extension of the domestic sphere, and the same presumably innate feminine qualities that fitted women for motherhood and homemaking also made them ideal librarians. They were idealized as refined keepers of culture, and selfless guardians of public morality, exercising a pervasive, yet gentle influence by instilling good reading habits, and thereby uplifting and refining the reading public.40

For both women and men the New York Library Club served a social as well as a practical, professional function. In addition to the formal discussions of library work, the meetings also provided an opportunity for librarians to mingle informally with colleagues from other libraries. This was especially true after 1891, when the club’s constitution was amended to include as its “object,” not only “consultation and cooperation,” but also “acquaintance and fraternal relations between” its members.41 Each meeting concluded with a “recess … devoted to social intercourse,” and every year a lavish dinner was arranged to “vary our meetings with one devoted solely to a good time.”42 These social events were often described in language that affirmed the link between libraries and the domestic sphere. Whenever possible after the meetings, members “repaired to the parlor” where the ladies “dispensed afternoon tea.”43 The informal gatherings of the club were a valued opportunity to mix business with pleasure, a “social hour spent in comparing notes and talking over the days work,” and as such they played a critical role in the professionalization of its members.44 They were part of a process by which librarians’ participation in a professional community became an element in the construction of their social identity. They were also a means of affirming members’ fitness for the cultural mission of the library, a chance to display their refinement and literary sensibility. For example,
the menus of the club’s annual dinners were always liberally embellished with literary quotes, each course annotated with appropriate lines of prose or poetry from Chaucer, Shakespeare, Coleridge, Thackeray, and others. This gave the diners an opportunity to impress their colleagues and demonstrate familiarity with the canon by “criticizing the fitness or misfitness of the quotations.”

Throughout the 1880s and 1890s the members of the New York Library Club had an abiding faith in the mission of the public library, an evangelical zeal to refine and uplift the reading habits of the masses. In the words of Ellen Coe of the Free Circulating Library, quoting from First Corinthians, the missionaries of literature were prepared to “believe all things, hope all things, endure all things,” firmly convinced that the “reward will seldom fail.” The library mission, however, faced two critical challenges during this period. First, the profession had to devise methods to gain bibliographic control over the much greater number of books that were being published and that libraries with on-going public funding could now afford. Second, librarians had to find means to interest the public in the libraries they were now funding. Both of these challenges could potentially undermine the library mission, as it was conceived by members of the New York Library Club.

The Mission and Library Methods: “the Deluge”

The movement for public libraries in the United States coincided with a dramatic increase in the number of books issued by American publishers. From 1885, the year in which the library club was founded, to 1901, when the New York Public Library created its Circulation Department, book production more than doubled, from approximately four thousand titles annually to more than eight thousand. Members of the club complained that there was “a deluge … of printed
matter, good, bad, and indifferent, now overwhelming the public,” and earnestly discussed the most effective means of “stemming the flood of trashy literature that … constantly poured out” from American presses. especially troubling for the missionaries of literature were the kinds of books that were published. The fact that “not many years ago Theology and Religion occupied the place that fiction now fills as the most prolific class of literature” was viewed as unmistakable evidence of “our degeneracy.” This “flood of twaddle” thus imposed upon librarians immense moral “responsibilities … in their duties as selectors … in discarding trash and encouraging good work.” To this end the city’s free circulating libraries frequently published lists of the best literature in their collections, designed to guide reading and help especially those “people [who] recognize the existence of standards and want advice.”

The sheer volume of the flood of printed matter defied librarians’ attempts to master it, even though a few of the more pious missionaries of literature insisted that it was their professional duty to do so. Melvil Dewey, for example, reminded members of the club that they must keep abreast of current literature outside of work, while Willis Bardwell of the Brooklyn Public Library advised them that there was ample opportunity to read as they walked to and from home during the lunch hour, provided, of course, that “the reader is sure-footed and can avoid vehicles and dodge other pedestrians instinctively.” Most members of the club, however, recognized that as a practical matter there was simply not enough time to read every book acquired by even a small branch library. This meant that librarians needed new skills in building their collections. Since they “unfortunately … did not possess ten or a dozen contemporaneous lives,” they had to develop the ability not to read, but to skim a book effectively, to “cultivate the power of imbibing briefly a notion of the contents and character of a book on almost any subject.” Thus the librarian’s expertise was a “peculiar kind of book knowledge, differing from
the scholar’s, …. broader and … not so deep.” In fact, in order to utilize their time most effectively, members of the club were encouraged to seek advice from experts outside the library, to make “an organized, systematic attempt to utilize others’ reading.” In effect, the flood of literature compelled librarians to outsource the mission of literature to some degree.

Time and efficiency were critical considerations in the development of the profession in the 1880s and 1890s. In order to better serve the growing reading public, public libraries were open longer hours than other types of libraries. Although most members of the New York Library Club generally regarded this as a necessary sacrifice in the interests of the library mission, there was increasing concern over the demands that it placed upon library professionals. Mary Imogen Crandall of Columbia College Library, for example, noted that while “the tendency of the time seems to lie toward … shorter hours and more frequent holidays for the ‘laboring man,’ … library piety … has seemed to require that the librarian shall cheerfully lay … [his] human rights … on the altar of the library he serves.” She warned that “in the midst of bustle and hurry … to serve the public as it should be served,” the library worker was in danger of becoming “an animated book-mill,” a “mere plodding machine.” This ironic allusion to the factory, to industrial labor is particularly revealing. At the end of the nineteenth century, the public library, even a neighborhood branch library, was a complex modern organization. Underlying all of the club’s discussions of the library mission was a practical concern over most efficient methods of getting more good books into the hands of more people. Members of the club were forced to address how these new library methods would affect the missionaries of the public library.

Librarians recognized that, just as in the factory or the corporate office, the best way to maximize efficiency in the library was to standardize materials and practices. For example, the
New York Library Club discussed at length uniformity in the collection of statistics, standard dimensions for books and pamphlets, and even optimum sizes and styles of type.\textsuperscript{56} However, the library technology that excited the most interest and was most closely linked with the professionalization of librarianship was the catalog. Members debated the relative merits of printed catalogs and card catalogs and the kinds of bibliographic data to be included in each.\textsuperscript{57} Recognizing that the card catalog was the more efficient format, in part because it allowed a greater degree of standardization, the club recommended a uniform size for catalog cards, and considered the best pen and ink to use in writing the cards, and the most effective design for catalog drawers.\textsuperscript{58} One of the earliest meetings discussed a plan, devised by Melvil Dewey, to distributed catalog cards through the ALA Publishing Section, and by the early 1890s companies that sold printed cards to libraries demonstrated their products to the club.\textsuperscript{59} Towards the end of the decade, John Shaw Billings, the first director of the New York Public Library, enthused that the profession’s “great improvements in bibliographic machinery” would make “the coming century … the bibliographer’s millennium.”\textsuperscript{60}

These discussions of cataloging and other library methods served a critical role in the professionalization of librarianship. They helped to meet a pressing need of any emerging profession, the creation of a specialized, esoteric body of knowledge that was unique to and helped define a body of practitioners as professionals. Inextricably linked to the development of a science for libraries was a growing demand for scientific education, and the New York Library Club was actively involved in the first professional, academic training for librarians. Melvil Dewey established the first school of library economy in 1887 at Columbia University, and the “pioneer students in this new department of academical instruction” regularly attended the club’s meetings and even served on committees. Members of the club were likewise invited to attend
lectures at the school. Although Dewey moved his program to the New York State Library in Albany in 1889 after a dispute with the Columbia trustees over the admission of women, a new library school was opened the following year at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. These new professional schools were praised as a source of the “great advances made in systemizing the work” of libraries, one of the “multiplying signs of the growing force of the library movement.”

Some members of the club viewed this systemization of the library mission as a mixed blessing at best. Catalogs, for example, allowed readers to select books without assistance and might therefore diminish to an extent the librarian’s influence over their reading habits. George Hannah of the Long Island Historical Society insisted that “nothing can take the place of the living librarian,” that “they can give information which no catalog can point out.” When the trustees of the society printed a catalog at their own expense, he protested that it was “not urgently needed,” that “the desire of the Librarian is to have visitors rely largely upon personal aid.” More disconcerting however, was the effect that such bibliographical machinery might have upon the library worker herself. There was some concern that the machine might come to overshadow culture, that in mastering the tools of the profession librarians might become mere technicians rather than missionaries of literature. Excessive reliance upon library methods could lead to a “round of … mechanical work” wherein “the only mental ailment required of the librarian … is the accession-book and the card catalogue.”

On the whole, however, members of the New York Library Club remained confident that the mission of culture would ultimately prevail. Like other reformers in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, most librarians greatly admired the rationality and efficiency of the modern corporation. While some may have harbored misgivings regarding library methods, they
generally believed that the systemization of the library would ultimately allow them to control the deluge of print and thus more effectively carry out the mission of literature. It was the “unselfish devotion to high ideals of library usefulness” that would “after all determine the usefulness of the library, rather than the excellence of mere methods.” Apart from their views on accession books and catalogs, however, members were forced to address the larger question of how to convert masses to the mission of the public library.

The Mission and Business Methods: the Masses

The discussions at the New York Library Club of such potentially controversial topics as library methods, at least as they were reported in the official minutes of the meetings, were never especially divisive. Differences of opinion certainly existed, but they were always debated in a friendly, collegial fashion. In late 1888 and early 1889, however, there was a surprisingly rancorous dispute in the pages of Library Journal between two founding members that sheds light upon some fundamental divisions within the club and the professional passions they inspired. Jacob Schwartz of the Free Library of the General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen opened the exchange with a contribution entitled “Business Methods in Libraries.” Among other points, he argued that, in a busy library it was clearly “impracticable” to offer personal advice to every library user. “Good business management,” which “includes a good classification and good catalogue … supplies a good portion of the educational work that some librarians think they are supplying when they are advising readers.” In a heated response, Max Cohen of the Maimonides Free Library reminded Schwartz that the librarian was expected to be much more than “a mere book-delivery machine or … a cataloging machine.” He was “more mortified than surprised at observing” his colleague’s “public expression [of] such a low ideal of
a librarian’s vocation” and warned that “it would be fatal to the elemental principle of the Public Library” and “the cause of higher culture.”

This rather heated and very public dispute between two members of the New York Library Club however was about more than just library methods. Cohen approved, albeit somewhat grudgingly, of “the element which associates system and method with the management” of libraries. Schwartz’s application of “business principles” to librarianship was much broader than this and more controversial. In a brief list of “‘rules’ [that] should be committed to memory by every librarian,” he included, shockingly, “advertise your wares” and “buy only what your customers want.” It was this association of commerce and culture that Max Cohen found so mortifying and that was the source of some friction during the earliest years of the library club. In 1888 probably the vast majority of the membership sided with Cohen. Most librarians agreed that Schwartz’s business principles did not apply to public libraries, because “the first, the last, and the highest factor [was] the educational capacity evolved by the library.” Yet through the 1890s there was a growing acceptance, if not of the overtly commercial principles outlined by Schwartz, at least of the need to cater to some extent to popular tastes in the management of public collections. The library club discussed new methods of selling the public library, of making the library mission more appealing to the masses.

The crux of the dispute between Schwartz and Cohen was the question of popular fiction. There was a general consensus within the club that certain works, such as dime novels or sensationalistic story papers, were unsuitable for a public library. Even Jacob Schwartz insisted that, in buying what their customers wanted, librarians should at the same time take care to “buy only the best.” However, most members of the library club would have agreed with Max Cohen that too many public library users had an unfortunate “tendency to devote their intellectual
exercise and recreation to the most conspicuously trashy of novels.” They considered it their duty to curb the masses’ appetite for popular fiction. The same year that Cohen railed against business methods in the pages of Library Journal, the club lobbied for an amendment to the Library Law of 1886 that would have reduced appropriations from the City of New York to free libraries that circulated more than fifty percent fiction. In this case, the membership was clearly carried away by its own rhetoric. If their proposed bill had actually passed, most of the free libraries represented in the club probably would have seen a significant reduction in their funding. Cohen, for example, estimated that the circulation of fiction normally ranged between sixty and eighty percent and approached ninety percent in some instances. Moreover, although fiction as a proportion of the total collection was usually much smaller, New York’s public libraries did, in fact, collect novels that could hardly be described as uplifting. In fact, many of the very same writers who were criticized at the club’s meetings could be found in the catalogs of the members’ collections. For example, Max Cohen’s own library, the Maimonides Free Library, offered several titles each from Ouida and E.D.E.N. Southworth, who were considered the most conspicuously trashy novelists of their day. Cohen himself dismissed them as “morally offensive” and “intellectually pernicious.”

Members of the library club usually justified the purchase of light fiction on the grounds that it would lead to more substantial reading. Some argued that this refinement would occur automatically, that literary tastes would gradually improve, once the masses were lured into the public library with second-rate novels and popular romances. They were confident that “the public, like the individual, is attracted first by poor and cheap things, but, having the power of self-growth, the mind must naturally expand and reach to higher aims in literature.” By the 1890s, however, this confidence in the inherent attraction of good books had waned.
considerably. Instead, discussions at the club emphasized more often the opportunity to actively influence the library user, to guide consumers of popular fiction to a better class of literature. The mission of the library was “never to crush or repress a taste, even if it be for thrilling adventure or improbable romance, not to crush but to convert and elevate.” While they never adopted Schwartz’s crassly commercial principle of buying only what the customer wanted, members increasingly recognized that, as a practical matter, in order to interest the public in public libraries, they had offer books that appealed to less refined tastes.

In the later 1890s the library club also discussed a number of innovative policies and services that made the collections of the public libraries more attractive and accessible to readers. For example, one of the most fundamental of these changes was the “two-book system.” Until about 1895, public library users were allowed only one volume at a time. Under the two-book system, they could check out two, provided that at least one of them was a work of nonfiction. The opportunity to borrow a second volume was thus intended as an incentive to read more substantial, uplifting books. Another new policy, the “open-shelf system,” was considered even more radical. From their inception, the free circulating libraries in New York were “closed shelves” collections. Readers chose a book with the help of a catalog or a librarian, then filled out a request slip and submitted it at the circulation desk. Under the new plan, adopted in most of the libraries around 1898, they were free to browse among the books on open shelves. As with the provision of light fiction, the open-shelf system was often described as a means of augmenting the influence of the librarian. One member referred to “indisputable evidence that what … readers needed in consulting [an open-shelf] library was personal aid from some interested and competent attendant, who should act … as a guide.”
About the same time, the club also explored ways to “push” the public library, to, in Jacob Schwartz’ provocative phrase, “advertise your wares.” Members may not have embraced uncritically the principles outlined by Schwartz, but they certainly came to understand that the success of their mission depended in large part upon their ability to market the library to consumers of print. Librarians like Max Cohen found his business methods mortifying precisely because they believed that crass consumerism was beneath the dignity of the profession, that culture transcended the sordid world of commerce. They were determined, in the words of another missionary of literature, that libraries “shall not be dominated by the self-seeking of the shops.” More and more often, however, members of the club made very explicit analogies between librarianship and the business world. Arthur Bostwick, for example, who became head of the Free Circulating Library in 1895, in a discussion of open shelves, remarked that “librarians might take a lesson from department stores,” which allowed consumers to browse the merchandise for sale. Another member advised posting lists of recommended titles, since “the public … is disposed to regard a posted notice of a book with the same interest with which it reads the advertisement of a bargain.” Such references to business methods did not mean that librarians had abandoned the mission of the public library. Rather, they reflected a growing realization that in the modern world even that mission had to be promoted, that “education … had come out of the cloister and into the market place.”

Although the mission of the public library has certainly shifted away from an emphasis solely on education, the issues raised at the meetings of the New York Library Club at the end of the nineteenth century remain relevant as we enter the twenty-first century. The concern that library methods might overshadow the library mission, for example, can be seen in contemporary
discussions of the digitization of libraries. Librarians today still debate whether they should be technicians or educators, or rather how best to balance these two roles. They also explore ways to control a deluge of text in a new medium, the Internet. Similarly, efforts to market the library as place rather than a storehouse of knowledge reflect a desire to enhance the role of libraries in the face of changing expectations from the reading public. Despite revolutionary changes in the information marketplace, a creative tension between mission and methods remains a hallmark of the profession.

Notes


4. The founding of the Boston Public Library in 1850 was the real beginning of the movement for public libraries in the modern sense of the term. The classic accounts of this seminal period are Jesse Shera, *Foundations of the Public Library* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949); and Sydney Ditzion, *Arsenals of a Democratic Culture: A Social History of the American Public Library Movement in New England and the Middle States from 1850 to 1900* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1947).
5. For an overview of libraries in New York about this time, see Phyllis Dain, *The New York Public Library: A History of its Founding and Early Years* (New York: The Library, 1972), 1-16. The Historical Society, the Astor, and the Lenox Libraries are described in *Public Libraries in the United States*, 924-28; 931-36; and 946-50, respectively. For the history of the Astor and the Lenox, see Harry Miller Lydenberg, *History of the New York Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations* (New York The Library, 1923), 1-94 and 95-128. This is the official history of the library. In 1895, the Astor and the Lenox and the Tilden Foundation established in the will of Samuel Tilden combined to form what is today the research division of the New York Public Library.

6. *Library Journal* 10 (August 1885): 177. This is an account of the meeting organizing the club on June 13, 1885 and includes the original constitution.


9. Lydenberg, *New York Public Library*, 199-240. The quote is on page 207 and is from a report of the library committee in 1881.


17. *Library Journal* 12 (December 1887): 555. This comment was actually from an Englishman, John Davies Mullins, who was elected the club’s first honorary member at that meeting. Mary Wright Plummer, “The Work for Children in Free Libraries,” *Library Journal* 22 (November 1897): 686.

18. *Library Journal* 24 (April 1899): 161. This is from the opening remarks at a joint annual meeting that brought together members of the Pennsylvania Library Club, the New Jersey Library Association, and the New York Library Club. At the time it was the largest library meeting on record other than an ALA convention.


22. The full text of the Sanger bills and an account of their fate in Albany is in Lydenberg, *New York Public Library*, 290-300. The quote is on page 294. Even though Dewey claimed at the meeting to support the bill, he testified against it in January in favor of the New York Free Circulating Library proposal described below. *Library Journal* 11 (March 1886): 84.

23. *Library Journal* 11 (March 1886): 82. This is actually part of the statement that Sanger made at the public meeting in defense of his proposal. He was at this point summarizing and responding to the arguments of his opponents. Since 1901, when the Circulating Department was created, three public officials have served *ex officio* on the twenty-two member NYPL board, the mayor, the city comptroller, and the president of the board of aldermen. Members serve for life and the board elects new members.


25. The City agreed in 1896 to build the present library on Fifth Avenue for the New York Public Library, which was created the previous year when the Astor and Lenox Libraries and the Samuel J. Tilden Foundation merged. For all of the legal documents related to the merger, the creation of the NYPL, and the free circulating libraries that were absorbed after 1900 into the new Circulation Department, see New York Public Library, *Book of Charters, Wills, Deeds, and Other Official Documents* (New York: the Library, 1905).


29. *Library Journal* 18 (June 1893): 196. *Library Journal* 11 (March 1887): 85. This last quote is from the public meeting in February 1886 called to discuss the Sanger bills.


32. *Library Journal* 12 (April 1887): 166; 22 (April 1897): 210; 25 (November 1900): 698. Teachers and principals were invited to and often attended the discussions on cooperation between libraries and the schools. The NEA established a Section on Libraries and Melvil Dewey served as its first chair.


37. In the largest free library, The New York Free Circulating Library, the first two head librarians were women. They served from 1880 to 1895. In the second largest, the Aguilar Free Library, the same woman, Pauline Leipziger, served as head librarian throughout its history, although her brother, Henry Leipziger, was sometimes listed in the annual reports as the “consulting librarian.” Other important libraries, such as the Cathedral Library and the Free Library of the General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen, were managed by men. In 1870,

38. Thirty-nine percent of the officers and thirty-seven percent of the members of the executive committee who served between 1885 and 1902 were women. By contrast, in 1902, sixty-three percent of the entire membership was female. Most of the female members worked either as catalogers or as public service librarians in the free circulating libraries.

39. Salaries were rarely discussed at the meetings of the club, but see for example, Mary Imogen Crandall, “Duties of a Library to its Staff,” *Library Journal* 16 (April 1891): 105-7. Crandall argued that “library piety” often convinced librarians that they should work for inadequate wages. It should be noted that Crandall and most members of the club used the masculine pronoun when referring to librarians. The notable exception to this was when they wrote or spoke about children’s librarianship.


43. *Library Journal* 17 (April 1892): 132. This meeting was held at the Young Women’s Christian Association. Meetings at the YWCA and the YMCA always concluded in “the parlor.” *Library Journal* 16 (January 1891): 23. This meeting was held in the home of Richard Bowker and his sister acted as hostess.


45. The account in *Library Journal* of the dinner in 1896 describes the members “conning the eight page literary menu and … criticizing the fitness or misfitness of the 117 quotations.” “Tenth Anniversary of the New York Library Club,” *Library Journal* 21 (January 896): 27. The
printed ephemera referred to in note 41 above include copies of several menus from the 1890s. My favorite quote is from 1900: “Have we not … dazed ourselves with books long enough? Whitman.”


47. The total in 1885 was 4,030 and in 1901 it was 8,141. These figures include pamphlets. United States Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States, From Colonial Times to the Present*, Bicentennial Edition (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1976), 808.


52. *Library Journal* 22 (January 1897): 35. Arthur E. Bostwick, Willis A. Bardell, and Wilberforce Eames, “What Should Librarians Read?,” *Library Journal* 25 (February 1900): 59. This is an article that followed the discussion at the meeting in January 1897.

53. *Library Journal* 22 (January 1897): 35. Arthur Bostwick replaced Ellen Coe as head librarian of the Free Circulating Library in 1895 and his discussion at this meeting of selection principles for public libraries is particularly interesting. He also called for book reviews that were written by and for librarians.


55. Crandall, “Duties of a Library to its Staff,” 105-106. As will be seen below, Crandall was concerned that library methods would come to overshadow the public library mission, that librarians would become mere technicians rather than missionaries of culture. The discussion that followed this paper was one of the most interesting during this period and, for various reasons, many members disagreed with Crandall. Ernest Richardson of Princeton University, for
example, held that “the librarian’s first duty to his staff was to see that they have plenty of work.” *Library Journal* 16 (April 1891): 117.


60. *Library Journal* 22 (April 1897): 210. See also, John Shaw Billings, “The Card Catalog of a Great Public Library,” *Library Journal* 26 (July 1901): 377-83. This was based upon a paper that Billings presented to the club in May 1901.


62. *Library Journal* 16 (January 1891): 21; 16 (October 1891): 300. Mary Wright Plummer was the first director of the library school at the Pratt Institute. She was a member of Dewey’s first library class in 1887 and went on to become a leader in library education nationally. See for example, Mary Wright Plummer, “Training for Librarianship,” *Library Journal* 26 (June 1901): 317-323; and Mary Wright Plummer, *Training for Librarianship* (Boston: A.L.A. Publishing Board, 1907). This was the first publication of the ALA Committee on Training. For the early history of library education, see: Sarah K. Vann, *Training for Librarianship before 1923* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1961); and Carl M. White, *A Historical Introduction to Library Education: Problems and Progress to 1951* (Metuchen, Scarecrow Press, 1971).


65. Crandall, “Duties of a Library to Its Staff,” 106-07. Opposition to Melvil Dewey within ALA often focused on his emphasis on library methods, which were seen by some to diminish the cultural role of the librarian. See, for example, Garrison, *Apostles of Culture*, 143-45.

67. There are no surviving manuscript minutes of the meetings before 1910 in the New York Library Club Records at the New York Public Library. All of the meetings from 1885 to 1901, however, were reported in *Library Journal*.

68. Jacob Schwartz, “The Librarian an Educator—Mr. John Schwartz Replies to Mr. Cohen,” *Library Journal* 14 (January-February 1889): 5-6. Both Schwartz and Cohen were prominent members of the club and participated actively in the discussions at the meetings. Schwartz in particular was influential in local library circles and developed a scheme of subject headings that was widely adopted by free libraries in New York.

69. Max Cohen, “The Librarian an Educator, and not a Cheap-John,” *Library Journal* 13 (December 1888): 366-67. The Maimonides was a small library operated by B’nai B’rith. Opened in 1850, it was one of the few free libraries that refused to be absorbed by the Circulation Department of the New York Public Library after 1901. As a result, it lost its city funding and finally closed in 1906. Dain, *New York Public Library*, 264-66.


74. *Library Journal* 12 (January-February 1887): 77. In a survey conducted for *Library Journal* in 1893, Ellen Coe of the Free Circulating Library reported the national average for the circulation of fiction was fifty-six percent. Ellen Coe, “Fiction,” *Library Journal* 18 (July 1893): 250-51. Because of the different ways that they collected and reported statistics, it is difficult to generalize, but fiction probably accounted for at least half of the circulation in all of the free libraries. In Coe’s own library, fiction was normally around forty percent, but their figures did not include juvenile fiction, which would have increased the average considerably. See for example, York Free Circulating Library, Eleventh *Annual Report of the New York Free Circulating Library* (New York: The Library, 1890), 18; circulation of approximately forty-two percent. And New York Free Circulating Library, Twenty-First and Final Report of New York Free Circulating Library, with a Sketch of its History (1901), 39; circulation of approximately thirty-nine percent. In the Aguilar Free Library, figures for 1890 and 1900 were sixty-three and sixty-two percent respectively, including juvenile fiction. Aguilar Free Library Society, *Second Annual Report of the Aguilar Free Library Society of the City of New York* (New York: The Library, 1890), 13; Aguilar Free Library Society, *Eleventh and Twelfth Annual Reports of the Aguilar Free Library Society of the City of New York* (New York: The Library, 1900), 37-38.
The third largest system in the city, the Cathedral Library, did not report statistics. Perhaps predictably, fiction was much higher, about eighty percent, in Jacob Schwartz’s library, the Free Library of the General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen, but this number apparently included all juvenile works, including juvenile nonfiction. General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen, *Annual Reports of the Treasurer, Secretary, and Standing Committees of the General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen* (New York: The Society, 1890), 22.


76. *Library Journal* 26 (April 1901): 219. Although the speaker in this case, a faculty member at Columbia, was himself confident that reading was improving, he did concede there were others who despaired that “literary tastes are in a fair way of being vulgarized forever.” In her survey of attitudes towards fiction in 1893, Ellen Coe asked if “you believe the reading of light fiction leads to more serious reading.” Less than twenty-five percent of the respondents said “yes,” approximately twenty-five percent believed it was “doubtful,” and over half said “no.” Coe, “Fiction,” *Library Journal*, 250-51.

77. Merington, “Public Libraries and Public Schools,” 158. By the 1890s, a growing minority of librarians accepted popular fiction as a form of harmless recreation, although this trend is not reflected in the discussions of the New York Library Club. See for example, George Watson Cole, “Fiction: A Plea for the Masses,” *Library Journal* 19 (Conference Proceedings 1894): 18-20. Cole was the director of the Jersey City Free Public Library and a member of he club.

78. Although the phrase was hardly used at the New York Library Club, other sources during this period frequently refer to the new policies and services in the 1890s as “the modern library idea.” For example, the final report of the Free Circulating Library boasts that the library had been at the forefront of the modern library idea, which it defines as a series of “changes … in the direction of greater facilities for the public.” New York Free Circulating Library, *Twenty-First and Final Report*, 24. Curiously, the only time the term was used at a meeting of the club was in reference to academic libraries. *Library Journal* 16 (June 1891): 182.


80. *Library Journal* 23 (March 1898): 113. In this discussion of open shelves, almost all of the participants praised the new system. Just four years earlier, one of the most influential librarians in the city, Henry Leipziger of the Aguilar, had declared that open shelves in would be impossible in his libraries. *Library Journal* 19 (April 1894): 133. By the end of the century,
closed shelves were rare. All of the branch libraries of the new Circulation Department of the New York Public Library had open shelves.

81. The reference to “pushing” libraries came in a discussion of “Catalogs and Methods of Making the Library Known.” Interestingly, it came from a member employed at a YMCA library. Even this missionary librarian had to, in effect, advertise his library. *Library Journal* 17 (March 1892): 99.

82. Crandall, “Duties of a Library to Its Staff,” 107. Another interesting example of this attitude among the more pious of the missionaries of literature is found in a discussion of the preparation of a guide to libraries in New York for the general public. Ellen Coe of the Free Circulating Library felt it would be “undignified” to defray the cost by soliciting advertisements. Her resolution to this effect was defeated, but a significant minority voted with her. *Library Journal* 16 (January 1891): 20.

83. *Library Journal* 25 (March 1900): 132. Theft of books was one reason some members argued against the open shelf system. Bostwick held that, just as department stores hired store detectives, libraries should employ “paid watchers.” Bostwick’s classic description of the modern public library, *The American Public Library*, also drew a very explicit analogy between libraries and businesses. He wrote that the modern library idea was “tantamount to a confession that the library, as a distributor, must obey the laws that all distributors must obey, if they are to succeed.” Arthur E. Bostwick, *The American Public Library* (New York: Appleton & Co., 1910), 3.