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A DRAMATURGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON ACADEMIC LIBRARIES

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A Dramaturgical Perspective on Academic Libraries

Abstract

Although many social sciences theories have been applied to the field of library and information science, one theory that has received relatively little attention is dramaturgy. The dramaturgical perspective posits that social life is inherently theatrical in nature. When applied to the academic library setting, both librarians and library users are seen as performers who play a variety of roles in front stage and back stage areas within the library. They strive to deliver convincing performances to their respective audiences by engaging in various forms of impression management. The application of dramaturgy to the academic library setting is critical for understanding the taken-for-granted nature of behavior in libraries. The dramaturgical perspective calls into question the common assumption that information seeking behavior is an exclusively logical, rational, instrumental process. Instead, it suggests that behavior in libraries is motivated at least in part by the attempt to maintain a favorable impression among those whom performers interact with.

Library and information science has traditionally been a highly interdisciplinary field. One of the distinguishing features of the field is the extent to which it draws upon other disciplines. Library and information science researchers have been extremely creative and resourceful in utilizing a variety of theoretical perspectives from the social sciences and applying them to the library and information science field.

In recent years, for example, researchers have used attribution theory to explain how librarians in a supervisory role explain how those they supervise are successful or unsuccessful in their work.¹ The principles of behaviorism and learning theory have been applied to the design of information literacy programs in order to make them more effective.² Social constructionism has been utilized in the development and assessment of digital libraries.³ The diffusion theory of Everett M. Rogers has been incorporated into a program designed to market new technologies to academic communities.⁴ Researchers attempting to measure user expectations of online services have also utilized diffusion theory to arrive at a more accurate assessment.⁵ The experiential learning theory of Kolb has been incorporated into library instruction in the electronic classroom setting.⁶ The concepts of Glaser and Strauss' grounded theory have been used in the study of bibliographic families in online catalogs.⁷ A plethora of other social science theories, including activity theory, cultural relativity theory, critical theory, game theory, structuration theory, personal construct theory, frame theory, and schemata theory have all been used in library and information science.⁸

One theoretical perspective that has been largely overlooked but that potentially provides an intriguing look at a neglected aspect of academic librarianship is known as dramaturgy. Behavior in libraries is often neglected because it has an obvious, taken for

granted quality to it. Dramaturgy is important because it challenges our assumptions that user activity is motivated largely by a logical, rational, instrumental process of information seeking and assimilation, as if users operated in a social vacuum. It suggests that people in academic libraries are inclined to act the way they do at least in part because they are in the presence of other people. Although dramaturgy is well established in the social sciences and has been the subject of numerous studies, only one article in the library literature appears to address it.⁹ This article is written in Japanese and has probably not reached a wide audience in the library field. It would thus seem worthwhile to explain the dramaturgical perspective and explore how it might be applied to the academic library setting.

Origins of Dramaturgy

Although Webster's Dictionary defines dramaturgy as "the art or technique of dramatic composition and theatrical representation,"¹⁰ a better explanation may be found in some lines of Shakespeare. "All the world's a stage, And all men and women merely players. They have their exits and their entrances, And one man in his time plays many parts."¹¹ These lines do more than neatly summarize the concept of dramaturgy, which posits that the world is essentially theatrical in nature, and that we are all actors and actresses to one extent or another. It also suggests that dramaturgy as a concept has a long history.

The earliest references may be found in ancient Greek civilization. Although Plato is commonly thought of as a critic of the arts and of theater, he has been characterized more recently as a kind of dramatist who wrote lengthy dialogues for his characters. In

the dialogue Philebus, he speaks of life as a great stage where tragedy and comedy unfold.¹² The metaphor of life as theater continued through the Roman period and on into the Middle Ages. When Don Quixote equates life with the stage, it is clear from Sancho Panza's response that the idea has been around for a long time: "A fine comparison" said Sancho, "although not so new that I haven't heard it on various occasions before-like the one of the game of chess."¹³ Shakespeare also made use of the idea in several of his plays, but it was not until the twentieth century that it caught the attention of both humanists and social scientists who then developed it into an elaborate theory. Writing in the 1940's, the literary critic Kenneth Burke introduced an analytical framework that he called dramatism. By this he meant that all action could be described in dramatic terms. The five key concepts of dramatism are act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose, which constitute the what, where, who, how and why of all action.¹⁴ The analytic framework for acting on the stage can also be used to understand the creative acts of poets, novelists, dramatists, and essayists. It is an acknowledgement that the nature of literary activity is inherently theatrical. Authors are both actors and spectators at the same time, and their works have a narrative structure not unlike the plot of a drama.

Kenneth Burke was widely read and his concept of dramatism were very much in vogue at the University of Chicago in the late 1940's when Erving Goffman was a graduate student there, working toward his doctorate in sociology. Goffman attended a seminar Burke gave at Chicago in 1947.¹⁵ For his dissertation, Goffman conducted an ethnographic study of the social structure of a small crofting community situated in the Shetland Isles. While conducting the study Goffman became fascinated with how the islanders interacted with outsiders, as well as with each other. He developed his field

notes into a dissertation entitled “Communication Conduct in an Island Community.” The dissertation became the basis for a more comprehensive theory of social interaction that Goffman later published as a book, The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life.¹⁶ Although the book was originally published by the University of Edinburgh, it was reissued three years afterward in Great Britain and the United States to critical acclaim and eventually became a bestseller.

The Dramaturgical Perspective

In The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, Goffman outlines six aspects of social interaction that constitute dramaturgy. These include performances, teams, regions, and region behavior, discrepant roles, communication out of character, and impression management. The author presents them as a means of studying social life in organizations from a theatrical perspective, noting in the preface “I shall consider the way in which the individual in ordinary work situations presents himself and his activity to others, the ways in which he guides and controls the impression they form of him, and the kinds of things he may and may not do while sustaining his performance before them.”¹⁷

Goffman used the dramaturgic perspective to call attention to one of the basic truths of human existence, that social life is inherently theatrical. This can be observed early in life. In the course of play, children soon learn to act out roles and will sometimes dress up in adult clothes or in attire proper to the role. Social scientists refer to this as anticipatory socialization, as the child learns to take on the role of parent or that of a certain occupation.¹⁸ Later on, in adolescence, children imitate the dress of older siblings or peers. Adolescents may try on adult occupational roles by taking part-time or summer

jobs. Role playing, then, is an important part of socialization and the process of human development, and it begins long before the individual embarks on a career.

It is thus not surprising that, while Goffman may have portrayed role playing and impression management in organizations as being conscious acts, some social scientists are not convinced. Acting out a role or trying to manage the impression one gives to others may not necessarily be conscious or manipulative. It may instead be to a large extent the result of habits that have been over learned or scripts whose original functions can no longer be recalled. Self-presentation may thus be automatic and unconscious.¹⁹ In particular situations such as a presentation or a job interview one may be more conscious of trying to project a certain impression, but much behavior that can be characterized as dramaturgical or theatrical may not be the result of deliberate effort. It is important to keep this in mind as one reads situations interpreted from a dramaturgical perspective because it serves to counteract the tendency to think that individuals who are seen as actors are somehow disingenuous, cynical, manipulative, or Machiavellian. With this in mind, let us examine how the dramaturgical perspective might be applied to the academic library setting, using the six dramaturgical elements enumerated by Goffman.

Performances in Academic Libraries

From a dramaturgical perspective, individuals who enter into face to face interaction with one another will attempt to influence one another by engaging in performances. Although performers generally intend their performances to be sincere and audiences similarly expect them to be, in some instances audiences will force a performer to deliver a cynical performance. A cynical performance is one in which the performer

deceives the audience for their own good. Such a performance can sometimes occur in academic libraries when a hysterical student who has not allowed him- or herself adequate time to complete an assignment approaches the reference desk looking for a particular source. When told by the librarian that the source is not in the collection or is checked out to another user, the student becomes desperate and panicky and insists there must be some way to obtain the source within the next day or two. The librarian, knowing full well that the material cannot be obtained in time, may nonetheless say to the anxious student in a sympathetic tone of voice, “You always have the option of requesting the material through interlibrary loan. It may be a long shot but you can give it a try.”

Librarians who may be embarrassed by the emotional outpouring of a student or who cannot bear to turn the student away feeling hopeless may resort to this performance to defuse the situation. Goffman, using the analogy of the confidence man, called this process of reconciling people to failure “cooling the mark out.”²⁰ This refers to the strategy used by the confidence man to keep his victim (the mark) from creating such a scene that it calls attention to the confidence man’s operation.

Librarians are not the only individuals capable of performances in the academic library setting. In a dramaturgical framework, library users are also performers who sometimes find it necessary to deliver a convincing performance to others who may be present, including librarians. An example can be seen in the reference encounter. To reinforce the teaching mission of the academic library and to help students become proficient lifelong learners, it is customary nowadays for librarians working the reference desk to show the user how to find the answer rather than simply provide the user with the answer. The user, however, may be interested solely in the answer itself and may not be

interested in the librarian's strategy for finding the answer or want to have to do the search themselves. Students who have caught on to this will sometimes approach the desk, explain to the librarian what it is that they are seeking, and then "play dumb" by acting as if they do not understand the librarian's recommended search strategy. By feigning ignorance, the student forces the librarian to spoon feed the answer to the student by documenting the search in such detail that the answer becomes obvious. Students who are able to play dumb convincingly are able to save themselves the work of searching by making the librarian do it.

An important part of any performance is what in dramaturgy is known as the "front." It consists of all the objects or equipment that a performer might use in the course of a performance. One aspect of the front is the "setting." In an academic library, the setting typically includes computers, printers, books, bookshelves, study tables, chairs, couches, service desks, etc. Certain settings are designated for certain kinds of performances, such as reference, interlibrary loan, and circulation. Performers will also exhibit a "personal front" that includes anything associated with the physical person. Not only does this include clothing, but also other physical attributes such as gender, age, size, appearance, speech, facial expressions and bodily gestures. Personal front can be further divided into "appearance" and "manner." Appearance refers to the physical cues that offer clues about the performer's social status. Manner refers to those cues that indicate the role a performer expects to play in a situation. Setting, appearance and manner must be consistent in order for the performer to present a convincing front. Thus if the dean of the library comes to work wearing an impeccably tailored suit and silk tie and carries in his hand a brown bag lunch, this will not go unnoticed by the library staff.

Similarly, the undergraduate who enters the library at nine p.m. the night before a final exam dressed in robe and slippers is likely to garner a few smiles and cheers from his classmates as they cram for their final exams.

In addition to front, another aspect of performances that is important is what dramaturgists refer to as dramatic realization. These are the activities that a person engages in to convey his or her legitimacy and appropriateness in claiming a particular role.²¹ For academic librarians, these activities might include sitting behind the reference desk, typing at a computer, thumbing through reference books, teaching a class in research strategies, or leading a tour around the library. Dramatic realization for librarians may be more problematic and difficult than for other occupations because it contains a much smaller range of visible procedures and activities than, say, an occupation like nursing. The activities of a nurse who darts from patient to patient, changing bandages, adjusting IVs, and administering hypodermics, contrasts sharply with that of the librarian helping a person at the reference desk largely by typing a few commands on a computer or gesturing in the direction of the stacks.

In turns of dramaturgy, library users must also deliver a performance, which must be realized dramatically. The student who sits at a study table surrounded by a pile of books, head in hand, assiduously taking notes and furrowing his brow, occasionally looking up but with a far-away absorbed look in his eyes, may be as fully realized a performer as the librarian involved with a patron. Other individuals in the same setting who keep looking up from their studies glancing around distractedly, blowing bubbles with their gum, or checking messages on their cell phones may be having a more difficult time realizing the role of student.

Performances are not only dramatically realized, they also involve a process known as idealization. The person who is performing a role will try to convey an idealized impression. This means that the person will have to downplay or hide any action that is inconsistent with the ideal. The academic librarian who wishes to maintain an impression of being cerebral and erudite will be careful not to bring her copy of Soap Opera Digest to the reference desk to peruse in between transactions. Instead a copy of the latest issue of the Times Literary Supplement or the New York Review of Books will be more in keeping with the image she would hope to convey. Similarly, the Head of Reference who is quick to chastise students for bringing food and drink into the library is careful to hide his apple in the reference desk drawer and furtively sneak bites when patrons are not in view.

The idealized performance that the librarian tries to convey may be a marked contrast with the ideal that library users strive for. Students who use the library will often take pains to present themselves as anything but bookish and intellectual. Instead the idealized persona may be that of a sports figure or pop icon.²² It is not uncommon to see users with baseball hats, chewing tobacco, tattoos, body piercing, and hair dyed rainbow colors. Some students have been known to approach the reference desk and ask a question while wearing headphones and listening to a portable CD player, appearing to all the world to be minimally engaged with their surroundings and trying their best not to seem like a lover of knowledge, a seeker of ideas, a protégé of the professoriate, or worst of all, a nerd.

Many performances involve an element of concealment. The librarian who teaches a class in research strategies and leads the student through a tightly-structured

sequence of increasingly intricate and involved searches, all of which manage to work flawlessly and produce exactly the results the students need for their assignment, often appears to the students and faculty to be highly skilled and competent. What is concealed from the audience and is incompatible with this impression is all the errors that the librarian made before finding just the right search examples and the right combination of search limits to produce optimal results. The audience never sees that the librarian spent hours checking the class handouts to make sure each command works. In order to minimize the possibility of performance failures, some academic libraries provide librarians with a standardized script to work from, further reinforcing the performance aspect of the work.

Library users must also at times conceal aspects of their performance that they would prefer the audience not see. The student who insists at the reference desk that he is only seeking online full-text sources for his history paper because he has already exhausted all the paper sources may not want the librarian to know that he has not bothered to search for paper sources at all. He may likewise not want to reveal that the reason he only wants full-text sources is so he can cut and paste them together into a paper that he needs to submit to his professor in the morning.

In the highly bureaucratic and rationalized setting that typifies large research libraries, the librarian is often expected to uphold multiple and sometimes competing standards of performance. Since the performer cannot meet all the standards, the ones that will be abandoned are the ones most easy to conceal so that others that are less easy to hide can be sustained.²³ The librarian working the reference desk is expected to be both quick and thorough. If the user is impatient and insists that he needs material quickly

or appears to need a significant amount of remedial coaching in how to search and locate materials for an assignment, he may be treated to a different performance than other users. The librarian, quickly assessing the situation, may give up any pretense of trying to teach the student how to do research and simply bring up a few full-text articles on the computer that can be given to the student. The student goes away, pleased with the fast service, and never realizes he may have obtained better sources if he had not pressured the librarian to produce results quickly or made it appear that the librarian was going to have to spoon feed the material to him.

Although performers try to convey the impression that the routine that they engage in is their most important one, the dramaturgical perspective suggests that performers are capable of multiple performances, or “routines” as Goffman refers to them. Thus a person can be a librarian to colleagues and to library users, but also be a son to his parents, a teammate to the members of the softball team, a parishioner to the members of his congregation, a patient to his doctor, and a husband to his wife. The individual gives one kind of performance with one audience, and another with a different audience. In dramaturgy this is referred to as audience segregation. This kind of separation is important in order for social interaction to proceed smoothly and for impressions to be properly managed.

While the rhetoric of contemporary organizational management places great emphasis on the special quality of the relationship between librarian and user, the dramaturgical perspective would regard this as largely a performance. The actual reality of most performances is that they are routine.²⁵ The performer must take care not to make this evident to his or her audience, however. When approached by a desperate,

needy user who must find materials for a paper that is due the next day, the librarian who may have encountered this situation a hundred times before is careful not to yawn. Doing so would risk making the transaction seem less unique and important than it should be. Library users similarly will usually attempt to maintain some semblance of dignity and respect by delivering a respectful performance as clients, but not in every instance. In some cases, users who are not satisfied with the answer they receive from a librarian may immediately go to the other librarian on the desk and ask the same question, much to the embarrassment of the original librarian.

Performances are depicted by dramaturgists as fragile and delicate and as capable of disintegrating as a result of even the smallest unintended gestures. The performer must be careful to maintain a steady, evenhanded demeanor and countenance throughout the course of interaction or otherwise risk destabilizing the interaction. The user who furtively approaches the librarian seeking information about the treatment of hemorrhoids might be likely to bolt if the librarian were to suddenly lose expressive control and begin to snicker. Similarly, the user is generally careful not to become impatient if the librarian helping him suddenly forgets how to spell a search term or cannot remember the title of a reference work. Audiences tend to be similarly supportive when the computer system suddenly goes down in the middle of a library instruction class. Both performer and audience wish to avoid embarrassment by maintaining the definition of the situation as much as possible.

From a dramaturgical point of view, a performer will generally attempt to enhance certain aspects of a performance and to downplay or obscure others. The latter is referred to as a process of mystification. By maintaining a degree of social distance,

performers appear more mysterious and idealized to their audience 26. Some librarians, for example, prefer to use staff lavatories rather than those frequented by users so as to avoid interacting with them or perhaps to avoid being seen attending to bodily functions that might suggest that they are, in fact, not that different from users. Other librarians who have offices with windows that open out onto public areas of the library may demonstrate unusual creativity and resourcefulness in covering up windows with book jackets, publisher's posters, or whatever is at hand in order to conceal their work from the public.

Many users engage in various forms of mystification in an attempt to maintain a degree of distance from others. Nooks, crannies, and remote study areas of the library are often the first to be occupied by users seeking as much distance from others as possible. In instances where obscurity is simply not possible, the process of mystification may become more labor intensive. It is quite common for librarians who receive requests for help from users to have to come out from behind the desk and help users who are seated at one of the public terminals. In the course of walking from the reference desk to the user, while passing along a bank of public terminals, users will often suddenly switch screens on their computer so as to hide the content of what they are viewing from the librarian. Similarly, when conducting a library instruction class, it is often the last row of the classroom that users will occupy first. Some users even prefer to stand in the back of the room rather than sit in one of the front rows near the instructor.

Teams and Teamwork

Although performances in academic libraries may be solo, they also frequently involve a degree of collaboration with other performers in staging a routine. Individual performances may be fragile, but team performances may be even more so. Each member of the team is to some degree dependent on the performance of the others, and this creates a form of mutual dependency as well as expectations about responsibility and reciprocity. Team activity also fosters a greater degree of familiarity and informality among those involved. In academic libraries, teamwork is quite common among staff and can manifest itself in a variety of ways. Teamwork can range from two librarians working together at the reference desk to more formalized subject-based teams in the sciences, humanities or social sciences, or functional teams for reference, collection management, library instruction, etc.

Teams are generally required to convey an image of consensus and agreement to the public. Any disagreements between team members are supposed to be resolved out of view of the public.²⁷ There is a tacit agreement among two librarians working at the reference desk, for example, that they will not contradict or correct each other in the presence of a patron. To do so might create an embarrassing situation that calls into question the quality and consistency of the performance that is staged for users. Most librarians will take care not to intervene in another librarian's transaction with a user, even if the librarian is struggling to find a solution, unless specifically asked to by the librarian.

Team members generally try to maintain as much control over the setting as possible. To use the example of reference again, librarians working the desk who receive

the same question several times in a row may attempt to alert other reference librarians to the question, and the research strategy used to find the answer, by posting it in the team's web log. This saves work for the other librarians and also ensures consistency of performance. Other means of control may also be used. Librarians who are unable or unwilling to work certain desk hours may arrange to trade desk hours with another librarian. In some cases, librarians who do not wish to work the desk at particular times may invent "appointments" or "meetings" and enter those on the daily schedule in order to prevent the scheduler from assigning them any desk hours at that time. In library instruction classes, teams that are giving a workshop will "lock" all the terminals of the students in order to control what they see and prevent them from drifting off on tangents or in pursuit of their own interests.

Library users also act in teams, perhaps the most obvious of which is the study group. In these groups students will often spend time trying to figure out what may be asked on an exam. They will interrogate each other in an anticipatory simulation of test conditions. Sometimes they have an actual group assignment that requires them to collaborate in order to meet the requirements of the course. The groups frequently manifest a seriousness of purpose interspersed with gossip, storytelling, jokes, and the ability to be easily distracted by cell phones, other groups, and anything that will take them away from the work at hand. In some cases, the study group may simply be a pretense for socializing in the library, either with other members in the group or with others outside the group who also happen to be in the library. Another form of teamwork that is common among users is the tag team. This usually involves a pair of users who will approach the reference desk together and who are working on the same assignment.

One user will pose a question to the librarian, and the other user will serve to expand or elaborate on what they are looking for, fill in any perceived gaps in explanation, and otherwise provide social support and backup to the other user. The two are usually in agreement and will complement each other with explanatory material. The tag team makes approaching the reference desk less intimidating and communicates to the librarian that this is a significant enough question for two individuals to ask, not merely one. By showing up together, users hope to impress upon the librarian the importance of what it is they are trying to find.²⁸

Just as the director is responsible to the audience for the overall quality of the performance, in academic libraries the supervisor serves as the director of the team. As one moves up the administrative hierarchy of the library, the roles become more dramatic. In general, the higher up the performer's role in the team, the more accountable the performer will feel to the audience and the less accountable to the other members of the team. This being the case, those in a supervisory role will tend to place dramaturgical demands on the performers and on the performance that may cause performers to distance themselves from those making the demands, and to regard them differently than other members of the team.

Those at the very top of the organizational hierarchy with the most power and authority may not necessarily be most involved in directing the team's performance. In fact it may be subordinates who are chiefly involved in running the show. The dean of an academic library may have the most visible, dramatic role, and have formal authority over the associate deans, but it is often the associate deans who are immersed in the day to day operations of the organization. In dramaturgical terms, the dean serves as the

“front man” for the library and must be highly conscious of the public ceremonial nature of his or her role. It is not uncommon for deans to exhibit a greater measure of care and formality with both their wardrobe and their lines, because speech and dress are critical to the role. This often stands in sharp contrast to librarians in other parts of the organization such as technical services, who may have considerably less audience contact, are more concerned with tasks, and who may be much less concerned with appearances.

Regions and Regional Activity

The dramaturgical perspective posits that all performances take place within regions that are contained by boundaries or partitions of one sort or another. Rooms, offices, auditoriums, shop floors, and corridors are all examples of regions where performances might occur. Performances take place in what dramaturgists term “front regions.” A front region involves performances which may or may not be given for an audience. Performers in front regions try to act according to standards of politeness and decorum, regardless of whether an audience is immediately present.

In academic libraries, the most obvious examples of a front region would be service desks such as circulation, reference, or reserve. When performing in these regions, librarians strive to maintain a higher level of decorum, politeness, and behavior that one might expect of a professional in an occupational setting. Many libraries have either implicit or explicit rules about how librarians and paraprofessionals should act when in these regions. Professional associations such as the American Library Association’s Reference and User Services Association have created behavioral standards that are supposed to exemplify how librarians should act at the reference desk.

The dramaturgical perspective encompasses more than these explicit forms of decorum. One less overt kind of regional performance is known as “make work.” This involves creating an impression that one is busy working hard trying to accomplish as much as possible, whether or not this is actually the case. Make work is especially likely to be engaged in when certain audience members are present, particularly those in a supervisory role.³⁰ Thus the librarian who is sitting behind the service desk slouching in a chair playing solitaire on the computer will suddenly jump to attention, switch screens to a more professional address, or shuffle some memos and skim them for details. Some librarians may bring work to the reference desk not necessarily to do work but to convey the appearance that they are engaged in work activity. Other librarians will bring a combination of work and non-work activities, so that underneath a stack of book reviews there is a crossword puzzle, in case the librarian does not feel like working.

To some degree library users also have front regions where they are expected to behave according to certain standards. Study tables in public areas constitute something of a front region for users. They are typically highly visible and tend to be surrounded by other tables of users. It is here that one is most likely to see users engage in what are typically thought of as library activities-reading, writing, and studying. Users tend to be more self-conscious and more circumspect in these areas. Study tables, because they are often populated by a large potential audience, often become staging areas for performances designed to impress, amuse, or otherwise capture the interest of fellow users. In an academic library, in which many of the users tend to be undergraduates, study tables are sometimes used for flirting with other undergraduates along with other forms of socializing.

Just as there are front regions, the dramaturgical perspective allows for another region called “backstage” or the “back region.” The difference between them is that high standards of behavior tend to be emphasized in front regions while behaviors that are suppressed from audience view are more commonly exhibited in back regions. The backstage area tends to be a region where performers prepare for performances, take a break from being onstage in a front region, or relax after a performance, without being observed by the audience and without having to put on a front. It is a private area open to other members of the team but not to the audience, and usually separated from front regions by walls, doors, or other physical barriers.³¹

There are typically many backstage regions in academic libraries. These include the technical services areas such as cataloging, acquisitions, and automation. Within the public services area, it includes the offices within reference, interlibrary loan, and circulation which are home to librarians and paraprofessional staff. It includes conference rooms, break rooms, and staff restrooms. Many of these areas are explicitly labeled as off limits to the audience of library users, with signs that say “staff only.” The front regions of the library tend to be clean, comfortable and tastefully appointed, often in marked contrast to the backstage regions, which may be disorganized, dusty, and full of old furniture and equipment.

Users of academic libraries also have backstage regions that they can retreat to though these tend to be less numerous than those for library staff, forcing patrons to be more resourceful. Public restrooms may at times constitute a backstage, as will study carrels. Far regions of the stacks, stairwells, group study rooms, elevators, and other regions of the library that are occasionally low in traffic may all be used as makeshift

backstage areas if the need arises. It is in these areas that users may find a few moments of privacy, unobserved by fellow users or staff. Users may sometimes use external regions of the library as backstages, such as corners of the building that serve as natural enclosures or ornamental shrubbery or trees that act as barriers to passersby.

Backstage areas are sometimes difficult to control. Library users often tend to wander into off limits areas unless these are plainly marked as off limits or secured by lock or key. A library that undergoes renovation and initially fails to clearly demarcate employee areas as off limits to users will find that users may annex these areas for their own use unless instructed otherwise. Employee break rooms may well be used as study areas or as a place for users to relax, use the soft drink machine, and generally make themselves at home if there is no signage or security to indicate that the area is off limits to users. At night, after librarians have left the building, backstage areas become home to another group of users, the custodial staff. The custodians have access to backstage areas in order to clean them, but often make use of the facilities in much the same way as librarians do-to rest, relax, and socialize.³² The staff refrigerator may also become contested terrain, with soda, snacks, and lunches being consumed on a regular basis with little regard for ownership.

Backstage areas that adjoin front regions may also be vulnerable to trespass. If the area behind the reference desk is not protected by counters or gates, library users will readily avail themselves of the ready reference collection, without asking permission, or simply walk through the area as a shortcut to another part of the library. After the reference desk has closed for the evening, users may help themselves to reference desk pens, pencils, stationary, telephones, or computers. After a busy evening, it may take the

librarian who “opens” at the desk in the morning considerable time and effort to clean and organize the reference desk so that it once again resembles the orderly, professional-looking desk that users normally associate with a library. Reference books must be collected off the floor or from misshelved locations; computer printouts, used staples, and paper clips must be swept away; and pathfinders and library use guides must be collected and arranged into neat and orderly piles. All these props must be returned to their proper stage locations in order to maximize the appearance of organization and efficiency for the audience.

Librarian and library staff behavior in backstage regions is often markedly different from behavior in front regions. Librarians who are free from direct observation by users will sometimes talk about them and their behavior in less than flattering ways, using language they would never use in front regions. Frequent library users who are difficult, disagreeable, or otherwise obnoxious are popular topics and are sometimes given names to identify them. A user, for example, who is known for his religious zealotry and for his dilated pupils, might be dubbed “the bug-eyed bible thumper.” Another patron who spends much of his time watching pornography on the public terminals and who serves as a volunteer for the Salvation Army at holiday time might be referred to as “the bell ringer.” Problem patrons are often given nicknames not only as a way to identify them but also perhaps to make them seem less onerous. Other library staff and library administrators are also frequent subjects of conversation. Librarians use the backstage area not only as a place to talk freely about others but also as a place to eat, drink, and relax, and they may slouch, put their feet up, and otherwise comport themselves in ways they would not when in areas not protected from public view.

Impolite bodily gestures such as scratching, belching, or clearing one's throat are all acceptable, or at least tolerated. Playful repartee and joking between librarians will frequently occur in this area.³³

Sometimes it may be difficult to keep regions and audiences separate. On occasion, librarians may inadvertently stumble into a region that is used as a back stage by users, and users may find themselves in an area in which they were not expected to appear. This usually engenders reactions of surprise and embarrassment on the part of both parties, depending on how quickly they are able to recover their act.³⁴ The student who opens the wrong door and encounters a pair of librarians engaged in a heated argument will need to lose his expression of astonishment quickly, just as the librarians will need to rapidly revert to their public persona if social unease is to be minimized. This is equally true for the unsuspecting librarian traversing a remote region of the stacks who is suddenly faced with a couple of young students engaged in a passionate embrace. The librarian will attempt to suppress the natural urge to gasp, and the startled couple will quickly rearrange their hair and clothing to try to present the appearance of normality and studious endeavor that their audience would expect to be more in keeping with the setting.

Other Roles

In addition to the three basic roles of performer, audience, and outsider (which is a residual category made up of those who are neither performers nor audience members) there are certain roles that dramaturgists have termed discrepant, because they involve an individual acting in a social situation under false pretenses. One of these roles is the shill,

which is a performer who acts like he or she is a member of the audience when in fact the person is a member of the team. When academic libraries bring in candidates to be interviewed for positions, the candidates are often asked to give a presentation on a topic related to the position they are applying for. Before the presentation, certain members of the library staff are sometimes approached by members of the search committee and are given planted questions that are supposed to be asked as if they were ones that they themselves really wanted an answer to, rather than the search committee.

Another discrepant role is that of the go-between or moderator. The graduate student newly employed as a research assistant for a professor sometimes plays this role. The graduate student will approach a librarian in a relative state of ignorance not only about how to conduct research in the library but about what it is that the professor has really sent him or her in search of. This may only become apparent to the research assistant after the librarian has done a thorough reference interview, and the RA discovers he or she cannot articulate what it is that the professor actually wants. In such instances the RA finds him- or herself in the role of the go-between. Librarians working in public services often find themselves in this role in their interaction with users. They are frequently called upon to articulate, interpret, and enforce library policies that were created by library administrators and that the librarians themselves may not completely agree with. Acting as a mediator between library users and library management can make for some particularly awkward performances on the part of the librarian, who must also be convincing in the role of service-oriented professional.

From a dramaturgical perspective, student-assistants, maintenance staff and custodial workers occupy yet another discrepant role, that of “non-person.” There are

persons who are present during a performance but are themselves neither performers nor members of the audience, nor are they present under false pretences. In many instances they may be treated by both performers and audience as if they were not there at all. They may be privy to intimate conversations between librarians that would not occur in the presence of other librarians, administrators, faculty, or students. Non-persons are viewed as being present for technical or instrumental reasons, and their roles are not scripted, so performers do not feel a need to limit their access to regions and information. They are akin to the stage hands that work behind the scenes to set up and maintain the show, but who do not perform before the audience or situate themselves in it.³⁵

The role that librarians play in their performance as librarians can create interesting status dilemmas. On occasion, the librarian who falters in his or her performance and makes an obvious error in searching before a student or professor or who enters the wrong command on the keyboard in a library instruction session may engender a certain ambivalence on the part of the audience. Not only will this tend to create embarrassment on the part of the librarian but it also may call into question the librarian's status claims to legitimate expertise and technical proficiency.

Perhaps even more interesting are the insights that librarians are given by the nature of their work into other performances by other individuals on campus. Librarians cannot help but see behind the front of intellect and erudition that faculty, deans, provosts, and others attempt to maintain. When such individuals appear at the reference desk and are ignorant or inept at navigating databases, finding information on the Web, using research materials, or sometimes more basic skills like spelling, their foibles become apparent. In such situations the librarian tries to maintain the user's

confidentiality and struggles not to succumb to cynicism. The studied neutrality that librarians exhibit with regard to the information that library users seek will also occasionally earn them the role of confidant. At times, library users tend to treat librarians like bartenders, and provide more information about their information needs and themselves than any librarian would hope-and perhaps care- to extract during a standard reference interview.³⁶ Perhaps more than a little advice has reluctantly been dispensed to countless lost or needy users during the course of a reference interview. While much of it may be related to scholarship, good study skills, or the virtues of preparation, some of it may go beneath that to deeper psychological, social and philosophical concerns.

Communicating Out of Character

Even the most skillful and experienced performers in library settings may at times experience situations in which it is impossible to remain in character. In the midst of a library instruction session, if the library computer system suddenly goes down, even the most cerebral, rational and measured academic librarian may be heard to mutter “damn,” as the formerly engaged students look up with an expression of “what now?” on their faces and begin to fidget. Such expressions are difficult to suppress and represent a more primal emotional response that is normally concealed by the actor’s character. Communication out of character can represent a source of embarrassment for the performer because it contradicts the official impression that the performer is trying to sustain.

As mentioned earlier in this paper, communication out of character can also take the form of how library users are treated when librarian performers retreat backstage. Library users will similarly denigrate and speak disparagingly of librarians when they are among their peers and non librarian is present. Librarians are sometimes criticized by users as being unhelpful, uncomprehending of their needs, or snobbish and condescending in their treatment of them. Criticism may run especially high during times of peak use or urgency, such as the final days of the semester, when users are feeling particularly pressured and stressed. Users may, however, also be critical of librarians as a social and occupational type. Librarians are sometime seen as nerds, social misfits, eccentric, rigid, overly rational, timid, and in general, as not highly regarded on campus or by society generally. Perhaps users consciously or unconsciously compare librarians as an occupational type with those members of society that they admire or envy and seek to emulate, such as media figures from the world of business, politics, entertainment or sports.³⁷

Another form of communication that takes place when the audience is not around is known as staging talk. This consists of discussions by the performers about the technical problems of staging the performance. The addition of a new online resource, the removal of certain reference sources for conservation purposes, and the breakdown of the projector in the library's instruction lab may all be topics that fall into this category. Librarians may talk with each other about how a library instruction class went or about what their hour on the service desk was like, what kinds of questions they were asked, strategies for answering them, and similar topics. Librarians who might have little else in common use this talk as a means of solidarity since it concerns experiences they all share.

Attributes of Skilled Performers

When an audience member deliberately acts in such a manner as to threaten the definition of the situation that has been established by the performers, it is called “creating a scene.” The expected interaction is suspended and an actor will try to brace him or herself for confrontation. The exchange between performer and audience member can become so intense and escalated that persons in the immediate vicinity are suddenly transformed into audience members. In academic libraries, scenes most often take place at one of the service desks-reference, circulation, reserve, or government documents. Users who feel slighted, thwarted, unsatisfied, aggrieved, or frustrated may turn the tables and throw a tantrum, immediately transforming themselves in the process from audience member to performer. The librarian who is momentarily thrust into the ambiguous role of being part audience member and part performer will do his or her best to improvise and assume the role of sympathetic minor actor. As long as the user remains within the range of reasonable propriety, this is how the scene will play out. Should the user escalate the tirade beyond a certain emotional threshold, the librarian may summon his own supporting cast in the form of colleagues, supervisors, or campus police.

Problems of team loyalty may arise in situations like this, if the performer empathizes too much with the user and gives away the performance by disclosing that it is all just an impression that is being fostered. On certain occasions when a student or faculty member complains that a database is difficult to navigate or that the policy of allowing journals to circulate overnight is ill-conceived, the librarian may admit in all candor that the user is right and that the library is indeed to blame. Subject liaisons may

feel particularly strong role ambivalence because their loyalties are divided between trying to present the best impression of the library to users but at the same time feel a certain loyalty to their faculty and students whom they have carefully cultivated and have established an ongoing relationship with. By being candid with their constituents, the liaison librarians gain important credibility and set the stage for future credible interactions. This is particularly true with regard to librarian-faculty relationships, because students constitute a more transient population that makes it more difficult to form relationships with them.

Team loyalty is not the only important attribute of a skilled performer. Dramaturgical discipline is also key.³⁸ One must appear natural, spontaneous and engaged without being so caught up in one's activity that the overall performance is compromised. The skilled performer remembers his or her lines while on stage, and is capable of thinking on his or her feet so that when another performer makes an error, he can cover for it and thus help maintain the definition of the situation. This can be observed at the reference desk when a librarian is asked a question and forgets the correct answer or is unable to locate it. If another is present at the desk, the second librarian may subtly and discreetly jog the original librarian's memory with an offhanded comment such as "Wasn't that source just moved to the stacks recently?" Another important aspect of dramaturgical discipline is self-control, which is the ability to control one's emotions and to be serious or humorous as the situation calls for.

A third attribute that contributes to a skilled performance is dramaturgical circumspection. This is the ability to understand how to stage an optimal performance and to anticipate any difficulties that may arise. It also entails the ability to select the kind

of audience that will be most receptive to one's performance. Certain librarians, for example, are better with undergraduates and may deliberately seek out opportunities to teach library instruction to that kind of audience while avoiding other groups. Other librarians are better with faculty and graduate students and prefer working with them while actively avoiding undergrads.

On those occasions when a performer clearly makes a mistake or is otherwise observed in a compromising situation, the performer will not only be embarrassed but so will members of the audience. In such instances, the audience members will engage in what dramaturgists call protective practices which are aimed at helping the performer salvage the rest of the performance. If a librarian is teaching a library instruction class and a certain command entered on the computer does not work, students will often sit quietly staring at the error message on their screen rather than point out to the librarian that he or she is in error. At the reference desk, if a librarian cannot remember a source and pauses to try and remember, the user will sometimes begin to name sources already consulted in an attempt to help the librarian.

Information Technology and Dramaturgy

Information technology was originally introduced into libraries as a tool to increase the productivity and efficiency of library staff. More recently it has been provided to users as a tool to help them with their research. It has also evolved from being a practical resource to a dramatic one used to manage impressions.³⁹ In many academic libraries computers with large monitors have been replaced by ones with flatter, sleeker monitors at the reference desk. Even though the images on flat monitors are often

smaller and inferior to larger monitors, the sleeker monitors are intended to convey the impression that the library is state of the art, regardless of their utility from a practical standpoint. Being perceived as state of the art is important to libraries because it is associated with providing a better education to students and a better research environment for scholars. Users like to think that the library is plugged in to an array of information resources from around the world. Similarly, library administrators may be outfitted with the most powerful computer equipment regardless of whether they have any real need for it in their work, because the equipment is used for dramatic effect to convey their importance in the library hierarchy. This is also true for other devices such as cell phones, pagers and palm pilots. Use of the best equipment is associated with having better and faster access to information, and the ability to effectively utilize such technology is in itself considered a form of power, as expressed by the term “power user.”

Information technology serves as an important prop to librarians who are trying to project an image of being rational, competent, technologically sophisticated knowledge workers. The presence of computers helps to reinforce this image because users of the library are often not as technologically savvy. Even in instances in which users may be technologically knowledgeable, they may not be familiar enough with the library’s particular system to utilize the technology effectively. The ability of the librarian to navigate and exploit the library’s technology to obtain information users need, serves to make the users dependent on librarians and thus enhances their status and professional image as specialists with valuable skills and techniques that are not possessed by the average person.⁴⁰

The fact that many librarians are not as technologically skilled as they might appear, and that many are dependent on information technology departments and staff, is largely hidden from users. The systems department in the library is usually hidden somewhere in the technical services department. Most of its activities occur behind closed doors in a backstage region. Systems departments are viewed by many librarians as being mysterious places, and systems staff are often seen as arrogant and taciturn. This negative image is a result of the secretive manner in which systems librarians address IT problems that librarians seek their help with. Systems librarians often solve the problem without explaining its cause or how they solved it. As a result, librarians feel that they are unable to learn and expand their knowledge of IT, and experience feelings of frustration and dependency.

Library web sites have also become a form of theater. They are carefully managed, often by a web development team, to convey an impression of the library as being highly organized, user friendly, colorful and entertaining, and comprehensive. Academic library web sites often use commercial web sites like Yahoo, Amazon, or Barnes and Noble as a model. The goal for the web site is to be perceived as a “library in miniature” with many of the same resources and services that are available in the library appearing in virtual form. Considerable time and effort is expended by librarians to ensure that the sequence of screens flows easily and logically for the user, and the entire presentation is carefully scripted so that the user will be presented with an orderly progression no matter which product or service on the page he or she selects. Any content that appears on the library’s web page must first be carefully screened and approved by the web development team in order to prevent material from appearing that would

embarrass or reflect negatively on the library and its management. In some instances, material submitted for posting must also be reviewed by the library's public relations department for appropriateness.

The library's home page is frequently used as a public relations vehicle to communicate positive developments in the library such as new products or services, or awards or recognition that the library or its staff have received. The attempt is to convey an image of the library as a dynamic, cutting-edge organization that is continually providing new information sources and services to users. Any problems that might arise with the library's products and services, such as equipment failures or reduced hours, are noted and portrayed in the best possible light.⁴¹ Information that is critical of the library or its management or staff is not allowed to appear. Testimonials by students and faculty extolling the library are displayed prominently. The library's web page, in an increasingly virtual environment, has become one of the most important tools that the library uses to manage impressions.

Library users also utilize information technology to manage impressions. Laptops and cell phones serve as status symbols. They convey to other library users that the person is technologically adept and affluent enough to afford expensive private technology that frees him or her from having to use public terminals that restrict options and offer less privacy. For users who prefer some diversion to the rigors of study, watching films or playing video games on one's laptop can be a way to communicate one's values to other users. Cell phones signify that the person is part of a social network, and a frequently ringing phone flatters the user by suggesting his or her importance or popularity. The ring itself provides information about the user's taste and style. For those

who prefer not to interact with others in the library, cell phones can be used as a way of escaping to a private world without seeming unsociable or socially anxious. For users who want to connect to other users in the library, cell phones are often used as walkie-talkies or personal intercoms to communicate with users on other floors, or sometimes even within the same room.

As academic libraries increasingly move toward a virtual environment, elements of dramaturgy have found their way into online activities. Email, listservs, blogs, and virtual reference service have all taken on a theatrical nature as librarians and users have become increasingly sophisticated in using them to manage impressions. Much library business is conducted via email both internally among library staff and externally in working with student and faculty users.

Librarians are able to use email not only to communicate overt information about various aspects of their work but also in more subtle ways about themselves. Depending upon the audience being addressed and the image that the librarian wishes to convey, the content and appearance may vary widely. A librarian, for example, may send a message to a close colleague gossiping about library politics that is poorly written, grammatically sloppy, and riddled with typos and foul language. The same librarian may send another email to his or her supervisor that is carefully composed, meticulously spelled, and politely formal in nature. Librarians have learned to manipulate the medium so that each message is congruent with the impression that they wish others to have of them.

Email can be used in a variety of ways by librarians to manage impressions.⁴² Librarians wishing to impress others with their technical virtuosity may resort to tactics such as using special email abbreviations like IMHO, LOL, and BTW to communicate to

others the image of being an adept, an insider, and a virtual virtuoso. Another strategy commonly used by librarians is timing. Just as the timing of an action or utterance can be very significant on stage, it can also convey important meaning online in the virtual world. Thus, the librarian who is anxious to develop a reputation for being industrious and hard working will take care to time his or her email so that it is sent in the early hours of the morning before work or late at night when everyone else has gone home.

Librarians who wish to appear buttoned up and on top of things will strive to respond to messages from management more quickly than anyone else. Not responding quickly, not responding fully, or not responding at all can be additional ways that librarians use to lend drama to online interactions. Librarians use the quality, appearance, and timing of email messages not only to convey impressions but also to gauge their own status. Poor quality responses or no response at all may suggest to the librarian that the audience may hold him or her in less than a favorable light.

Library users are also quite skilled at using email in a theatrical way. One reason why virtual reference is growing in popularity is because it provides an opportunity for users to ask questions of librarians without the discomfort or embarrassment that may exist in face to face encounters at the reference desk. Realizing this, library users will email questions to librarians that they would be unlikely to pose in person. Such questions can range from the obvious, such as “what are the stacks?” to very demanding multi-part questions that might require a team of librarians working over a period of months to answer.

Users often incorporate a variety of dramatic elements in virtual reference transactions. The use of highly emotional language is commonly incorporated to garner

the librarian's attention and to convey urgency or importance.⁴³ Such emails may be typed all caps and use a number of unusual characters such as asterisks, exclamation points, underscores, and dashes. Emotions are frequently used to communicate that the message is highly significant and that the user has strong feelings about the request. Some questions will be accompanied by elaborate stories detailing exhaustive or heroic efforts made by the user to obtain the information and to convey a desperate quality. These email messages may be carefully crafted to evoke a sense of sympathy and compassion in the librarian. Some messages contain extremely courteous salutations and closings which are intended to communicate respect and ingratiate the user with the librarian.

Virtual reference constitutes a very visible and tangible kind of performance for librarians. Answers are recorded, so librarians who wish to convey an image of competence and industriousness in the reference area try to answer as many virtual reference questions as possible. Competition among librarians to claim a question can be keen, and often the first thing a librarian will do when arriving at the desk is to log on to the virtual reference service and claim any questions that have not yet been taken. Before doing so, a librarian will quickly skim each question to make sure it is one he or she wants to answer and, most importantly, is capable of answering. Claiming a question to answer that one is unable to answer would result in a poor performance and would be worse than not claiming it at all. The objective of the librarian is to claim as many questions to answer that seem to be readily answerable and to leave the rest for others. The goal is to accumulate as many correctly answered questions in the completed questions log as possible in order to create the appearance of productivity and efficiency.

Librarians who answer virtual reference questions tend to be highly circumspect in their responses. Knowing that the answers take the form of a permanent record that is recorded in a log makes librarians acutely aware of the public nature of their reference performance. Librarians tend to respond in quasi-formal language that is polite but reserved, and their answers are carefully formulated to convey the impression of being both accurate and complete. Since they are highly conscious that their answer could be examined and scrutinized at any time, librarians may deliberately avoid virtual reference questions that are difficult, complex, labor intensive, ambiguously stated, or of a non-academic nature.⁴⁴ In some ways, virtual reference is considered more public than actual reference and also riskier. Because answers are recorded and serve as a permanent record of the librarian's performance and skill, they may come back to haunt the librarian at a later point.

High-risk virtual reference questions that go unanswered create a dilemma for virtual reference supervisors who want to convey an impression of responsiveness and proficiency to users. In some instances, a supervisor may suddenly thrust a librarian into the spotlight by electronically assigning the question to him or her, and forcing the librarian to respond. In these situations, the librarian who gets stuck with the question will try to improvise and formulate some sort of response to the user that may not actually answer the question but will convey a tone of empathy and may at least suggest some strategies for getting started, all the while hoping that the answer is sufficient enough to propitiate the user so that he will not demand an encore or ask for clarification.

Conclusion

This study has attempted to apply a dramaturgical perspective to the academic library setting. Goffman's theoretical perspective of social settings as stages and social interaction as theater utilizes Burke's theatrical analogy to help us see beyond the familiar taken for granted reality of social life and reveal a social world that is normally hidden.⁴⁵ Viewing academic libraries from a dramaturgical perspective helps increase understanding of user and librarian behavior and thus of libraries themselves. The dramaturgical perspective enables one to view everyday life in the library much as an anthropologist or a traveler might view a different country and culture, and see it fresh for the first time.

Although Goffman developed the dramaturgical perspective in the 1950's, his work has given rise to a distinctive field of impression management studies that continues to this day. It signifies the increasing importance of image management to individual and organizational success. Appearances have become critically important to libraries such that in recent years they have become increasingly interested in marketing and public relations. Much of the work performed in academic libraries is now done with an eye toward creating the appearance of efficiency and effectiveness. New projects are undertaken and new materials purchased based in part on how they might look in an annual report. Library users have been transformed into an audience whose reviews, in the form of annual student surveys, focus groups, or exit interviews, are considered a key indicator of the library's success as an organization.

At the individual level, this new emphasis on appearances is reflected in recruitment and hiring practices for librarians. Expertise in the form of education and

experience is downplayed in favor of interpersonal skills and attitudes. In order to garner good reviews from the audience, prospective candidates must evince traits like enthusiasm and the ability to work collegially, be a team player, have a positive attitude, and even possess the ability to laugh at oneself.⁴⁶ The ability to present oneself before an audience, to communicate well, and to comport oneself adroitly in group situations is considered desirable if one is going to deliver a good performance. It is no longer expertise, so much as the appearance of expertise, that seems important. Style takes precedence over substance in a culture in which impressions are critical.

What are the implications of the increasingly theatrical culture of academic libraries for users? On the surface, users will likely be pleased to see that the library has thrust them increasingly into the role of audience members. Since more and more decisions are being made with an eye toward the audience, users may be gratified to realize that they are the subject of group attention. The question arises as to what extent they will be a critical and discerning audience. It may escape them that in a culture in which much of what is done is intended to keep them satisfied and ensure that they will be a loyal audience that keeps returning to provide the library with a string of sellout performances, there is a danger that the audience may become more interested in the spectacle than in the ideas it was originally intended to convey.

The dramaturgical perspective is valuable for understanding academic libraries not only because it helps reveal an aspect of library reality that is often taken for granted, but because it points to some of the limitations of the library as theater. Academic libraries as social settings may always be theatrical in nature, but librarians have to be more than performers and crowd pleasers. They must offer real substance in the form of

resources and expertise that goes beyond appearances and impressions. How to effectively convey this in a way that appeals to an audience that has become jaded by media sensationalism and a culture of hyperbole is one of the greatest challenges facing academic libraries in the years ahead.

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