

Why are we still defined by our Building?

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[Slide 1]



What you see on the slide is, of course, not a real advertisement. However, I wouldn't be surprised if that is roughly how the likes of us are perceived from outside the Information Profession.

We all know it isn't true – this is a New Professionals Conference full of young, dynamic, ambitious people. Some of us even dress well. But we're fighting against peoples' preconceptions all the time.

By way of introduction, my name is Ned Potter. I work for the University of Leeds, as Digitisation Coordinator for the library. This involves making key resources available online to our students, via the VLE. I could do this job without ever setting foot inside the library! And yet when I tell people where I work, their face will often display a mixture of horror and sympathy – because I am defined by the building I work in. I carry with me the baggage of associations with 'the library', and it doesn't matter how much or little time I actually spend in the building itself.

There is a large body of work in existence on librarians, stereotypes, and image; my particular focus is on the building, and how many of us have escaped the physical confines of the library, without being able to escape

the preconceptions that go with it. I'll be talking about what those preconceptions are, why they really *are* important, and what we can do to change them.

[Slide 2]

What preconceptions?

When I began research for this paper, I was amazed at just how much has been written on librarians and the way we are viewed by everyone else. There are entire books on the subject, from Ruth Kneale's *You Don't Look Like A Librarian*¹, published this year, back to a 1982 volume by Pauline Wilson, called *Stereotype and Status: Librarians in the United States*², and beyond.

It seems we Information Professionals have been preoccupied with this subject for a while – and why not? Just as nurses complain that they get a raw deal of portrayal in popular culture, so do us librarians. I'm tempted to say that if nurses get portrayed as fun-loving and frivolous, it doesn't impede their ability to nurse their patients as much as our portrayal as dull, backward-thinking and fusty impedes our ability to serve our customers (after all who wants to learn how to find resources from someone they don't respect?). But that would probably be displaying the same kind of ignorance of the Nursing profession as I'm accusing everybody else of displaying towards ours. What I *can* state with confidence, though, is that while teachers and, more recently, Social Workers, often get demonised by the media, and while nurses, computer techno-geeks and perhaps politicians have to suffer through a largely one-dimensional portrayal on modern television, no profession has quite the canon of unfavourable stereotypes from a broad range of sources, as librarians.

We're all familiar with the most common of them. Last year in the *Electronic Journal of Academic and Special Librarianship*, Maura Seale explored this in detail and came up with five major categories of librarian in mass media, popular culture and public perceptions.³

¹ Kneale, Ruth (2008) *You don't look like a librarian*. Information Today Inc

² Wilson, Pauline (1982) *Stereotype and Status: Librarians in the United States*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press

³ Seale, Maura (2008) 'Old Maids, Policeman and Social Rejects: Mass Media Representations and Public Perceptions of Librarians' in *Electronic Journal of Academic and Special Librarianship*, Vol 9: 1

[Slide 3]

Maura Seale's summary of Librarian Stereotypes

- The Old Maid Librarian
- The Policeman Librarian
- The Librarian as Parody
- The Inept Librarian
- The Hero/ine Librarian

(From 'Old Maids, Policeman and Social Rejects: Mass Media Representations and Public Perceptions of Librarians')

Personally I might add to that list, 'The Bibliophile Librarian' who loves books so much they really don't want to share them with anyone, let alone members of the public, and a colleague of mine also suggested 'The Kindly Librarian' – an elderly man or woman who meets an unhappy child and, perhaps remembering their own experiences growing up, frees them from the bullies by allowing them to enter *the world of their own imagination...*

You may all have more of your own. Seale does capture the main portrayals well, and it's worth examining them in a bit more detail.

The Old Maid librarian is really the dominant stereotype, and largely what I was referring to in my ersatz advert at the start. Frumpy and sexless, the old maid will sit behind her Book Issuing desk wearing terrible clothes and oozing unhappiness. Seale also points out a 'Young Maid' derivative of this – potentially attractive, but "their appearance also indicated repression in some way."⁴ This repression is important to the stereotype – in Doug Highsmith's examination of librarians in comic books⁵ he notes that Batgirl's librarian alter-ego dresses in such a way as to heavily disguise any physical attractiveness she may possess (in direct contrast to her super-heroine outfit which of course accentuates it). And we're all familiar with the moment in a film when, perhaps in slow motion, the Young Maid will shake her hair out of her librarian's bun, remove her librarian's glasses, and affect a miraculous swan-like transformation into the love-interest of the hero. At least you women have that transformation to look forward to; us men start off meek and mild, and that's pretty much how we stay...

The Library Policeman is the person who takes delight in punishing library users for their lateness, their noise-levels, or really just anything at all. The

⁴ Black, Sharon. "Checking Out the Librarian: The Depiction of Librarians and Libraries on Prime Time Television." *Popular Culture in Libraries* 1, no. 4 (1993): 35-62 – page 5. Cited in, Seale, Maura (2008) 'Old Maids, Policeman and Social Rejects: Mass Media Representations and Public Perceptions of Librarians' in *Electronic Journal of Academic and Special Librarianship*, Vol 9: 1

⁵ Highsmith, Doug. "The Long, Strange Trip of Barbara Gordon: Images of Librarians in Comic Books." *The Reference Librarian* 78 (2002): 61-83. Cited in, Seale, Maura (2008) 'Old Maids, Policeman and Social Rejects: Mass Media Representations and Public Perceptions of Librarians' in *Electronic Journal of Academic and Special Librarianship*, Vol 9: 1

building is very important in this definition – it is because the Library is *his domain* that the policeman can scare and cow people who normally wouldn't look twice at him in the street. We might even be encouraged to make a connection between these two things; the library policeman is marginalised and ignored by society at large, so when he is in his library building he can finally extract revenge with a series of petty grievances, punishable by the dreaded library-fine. Seale also describes the Library Policeman as a know-it-all figure, and one fond of publically humiliating users.

(She also mentions in passing a Stephen King short story called *The Library Policeman*⁶. I'd not heard of this before and did a little research; it features a couple of stereotypes taken to extremes. The Library Policemen is a sinister figure who assaults the hero when he doesn't return his books on time - and, we later find out, molested him as a child to punish the same offence. The Old Maid is mosquito-esqe monster who sucks the life-force out of children's eyes to ensure they are scared and well behaved, and later murders the policeman investigating her, kills herself and then comes back as a ghost to work in the same library. Suddenly, the stereotype that librarians are a bit boring doesn't seem so hard to endure...)

The Librarian as Parody takes us into rather more murky waters. This refers to being fully aware of the librarian stereotype, and either playing up to it or dismantling it completely and becoming an exaggerated opposite. An example of the latter is the film *The Librarian*, in which the macho hero is, to quote Seale, "a sexy, adventurous librarian with two love interests." An example of the former is the Nancy Pearl action figure.

[Slide 4]



Nancy Pearl Librarian Action-Figure

Nancy Pearl is a sort of cult-librarian figure in America, working for Seattle Public Library, appearing on radio shows, and author of the well-received

⁶ King, Stephen (1990) 'The Library Policeman' in *Four Past Midnight*

2003 volume *Book Lust*. She has her own action figure which you can see on the slide; it comes complete with a stack of books. The most controversial aspect is the push-to-shush function – is this an example of librarians reclaiming or appropriating their image for themselves, subverting the stereotypes by embracing them, and undermining them with a kitsch librarian doll? Or is this simply pandering to, and perpetuating, the stereotype?

Here is a quote from a Seattle Times Interview⁷ with Pearl herself:

[Slide 5]

Pearl predicts that the shushing motion — triggered by a button on the doll's back — will determine "which librarians have a sense of humor." She likes to believe that today's librarians are secure enough in their work that they won't take offense at the old cliché.

(Interestingly, the toy-maker responsible for the doll offered two alternative actions – one was the shushing, and the other was having hair in a bun which could 'pop off'. This bun idea – proving just how entrenched the bun is as part of the librarian's armoury of stereotypes – was dropped for technical reasons and because having *two* such clichés was considered 'over the top'...)

Now I have a sense of humour, the kind that sometimes gets me into trouble at work. I'm relatively secure in what I do (although I do avoid using the word 'library' for as long as humanly possible when telling people about my job...). And generally I do think the shushing-action doll is funny. But, there is an over-arching issue here which is that it *is* perpetuating the stereotype. Any of the Librarian as Parody figures (literary figures, cinematic figures, and action-figures) draw attention to the stereotype and further ingrain them into popular culture, even if they try and subvert them or treat them ironically. So as a person, I find the doll funny. As an Information Professional, I'm forced to conclude that to take a popular librarian who has achieved cult status in part through her ability to communicate her love of books at a very accessible level, helping promote a positive image of librarians, and reduce her to just another library policeman telling people to be quiet and, by association, stamping out the fun one shush at a time, is 'a bad thing'. And not only that, but by considering it 'a bad thing' rather than harmless fun, I'm further conforming to the joyless librarian stereotype!

The Inept Librarian, it must be stressed, is not inept at his or her library-based job. The title refers to their being socially inept, or out of touch. The

⁷ Broom, Jack. [Toymaker finds librarian who's a real doll](#). *Seattle Times*, July 10, 2003.

Hero or Heroine Librarian is a more positive portrayal, although it can easily descend into parody. Interestingly, in Seale's summary of what others have written, Rupert Giles the librarian from Buffy the Vampire Slayer is characterised by some as inept, and by others as heroic. Although Giles is friendly and elegant, and the knowledge he gains from his library has, apparently, saved the entire Universe on many an occasion, he is also seen as befuddled, and out of touch. Crucially he is also inhabits a sort of Victorian ideal of a library, all wood cabinets and dusty old books. He has no familiarity with information technology at all – seeing as the modern librarian uses technology for the advancement of learning all the time, even a relatively positive portrayal of a librarian such as Giles is obstructive to our users seeing as we really are.

One thing which unites these stereotypes is that all the characters are defined by their building. The library in which they do their jobs informs their very personalities, even when they aren't actually at work.

[Slide 6]

The Building

Libraries have been around for almost as long as the written word, with the earliest known examples of writing (stone tablets discovered at Uruk, in what is now Iraq), showing evidence of having been archived in a systematic fashion. The word librarian just means 'the keeper of the library', and that is exactly what librarians did for the first five millennia of their existence. Perhaps the librarian would have responsibility for acquiring new manuscripts, the preservation and storage of the existing materials, the regulation of access to those materials. But they were, nevertheless, quite rightly defined by the building – the library in which the texts were housed.

This is no longer the case. It very hard for the modern librarian to be defined by *any* one thing. What do Customer Services Staff, the e-Resources Team, the Cataloguers, the Student Portal people, the Systems Team, the VLE Team, Special Collections, Ordering and Processing, the Digital Repository team, the Archivist and so on, have in common? Short of the fact that they're all employed by the University Library, it's hard to find anything that applies to such a disparate group of professionals. Certainly, very few of them can be defined by the building in which they work – in fact, most of them don't work in the public-facing part of the library at all. Never have I seen a pop-culture depiction of, say, a member of the VLE team, who works for the library but whose offices are located elsewhere on campus... They are library workers, but their roles owe nothing to the traditional image of the library – an austere, silent place of learning and reflection, with draconian rules and regulations.

Perhaps the one thread which does run through all those roles is technology. Everyone uses information technology with the possible exception of those employed to shelve or to preserve books – and yet, even relatively positive librarian portrayals such as Giles from Buffy reflect exactly the opposite. Which brings us neatly on to...

[Slide 7]

Why it matters

Do the stereotypes matter at all? Some, like Nancy Pearl, would argue that perhaps they don't. I wanted to know how my colleagues felt about the way in which Information Professionals are perceived, so I devised a brief, very unscientific questionnaire and advertised it in our staff bulletin. Clearly this was important to people all across the age-range; there were 50 responses within a week and some strong reactions.

[Slide 8]

Leeds Library Staff Questionnaire

Do you feel librarians are portrayed fairly and accurately in popular culture?

Yes: 11%

No: 89%

I asked first if they thought librarians were portrayed fairly and accurately in popular culture. 11% said yes, 89% said no.

[Slide 9]

Leeds Library Staff Questionnaire

Do you believe there is any truth in the 'librarian' stereotype? (Which is to say: severe, prim, badly dressed, probably lacking basic social skills, etc.)

Yes, it is entirely accurate:	0%
There is an element of truth to it:	28%
It is no longer relevant to modern Information Professionals:	60%
It is completely untrue:	12%

I asked them if they thought there was any truth in the librarian stereotype, and as you can see the majority of people felt it was no longer relevant to the modern Information Professional. There was also a section for

comments – and this was there the strong reactions came in. One person said:

[Slide 10]

Leeds Library Staff Questionnaire

“...even by asking these kinds of questions we are furthering the stereotype. There will always be stereotypes – no point in being bothered about that – but let’s not do anything to encourage them (by worrying about it for example).”

Later I asked if there was anything we could do to improve our image. Responses included:

[Slide 10]

Leeds Library Staff Questionnaire

“Stop being obsessed / preoccupied with image and get in with being Information Professionals.”

...and...

“I’m reminded of the drunk who says ‘I’m not drunk.’ Stop perpetuating the stereotype myth – stop saying ‘we’re not prim and proper’... we are dynamic and interesting, let’s prove that, instead of denying a fallacy.”

All responses were anonymous, but the survey software allowed me to see that those quotes were from three different people, who all clearly felt along very similar lines. It isn’t that they believe the stereotypes are unimportant as such, but rather that people like me shouldn’t be putting so much emphasis on them at conferences like this.

However, it is my belief that the stereotyping issue is significant enough that we *do* need to confront it head on – because ultimately it interferes with our ability to deliver a service. I asked Leeds library staff if they felt library workers receive sufficient respect from outside the profession.

Do you feel library-workers receive sufficient respect from outside the profession?

Mostly:	6%
Partly:	35%
Not really:	49%
Not at all:	5%
I don't know:	5%

Only 6% said Mostly; the largest group said Not Really. More than one person commented that most people don't know it is a skilled profession at all, or that you can qualify in it.

A lack of respect results in a less successful information provision. We moved onto this section from talking about technology – we all use it, but none of the librarian stereotypes do. This genuinely influences people's perceptions of library staff – they don't expect us to be purveyors of cutting edge technology, and nor do they expect us to be able to teach them how to use it. Students don't realise just how much modern content-delivery methods are driven and provided by the library, and so many don't come to us for help with Information Technology. And of those that do, any harbouring any doubts about our technological credentials may be less inclined to trust our advice.

This is reflected in a study of the 'Google Generation', conducted by UCL. 89% of today's college students will use an internet search engine as their starting point for academic work, while just 2% begin from their library's website. To add insult to injury, a higher percentage (93%) are satisfied with their results from Google etc than those pursuing a librarian assisted search (84%)⁸. The report also firmly established that, such is the library's association with 'the book', students aren't even aware of the digital resources, often obtained via huge investment, that the library offers (or, perhaps even worse, they are aware of them but don't believe the library to be responsible providing access to them...). Part of the reason for this is surely the way library staff are perceived.

We are said to live in an Information Age – certainly, information has not been such a key currency in modern history as it is now. Librarians are the

⁸ UCL (2008) *Information behaviour of the researcher of the future*. Page 7. Accessed via <http://www.bl.uk/news/pdf/googlegen.pdf>

experts in information, and we help facilitate knowledge. It is vital that our customers respect us in order that we can help them most effectively.

There is another aspect as to why our image is important, quite apart from our ability to effectively influence our users. The phenomenon is known as the 'greying of the workforce' – in 2006 Alan Danskin noted that 33% of the cataloguing workforce in the US will retire by 2010⁹ and in this country many of the customer services staff who make library work their career are close to retirement, to be replaced with younger people for whom the job is only transitory. Retiring staff *will* need replacing – and at the moment, insufficient numbers are being attracted to a profession wrongly seen as boring. This alone is a convincing argument for why our image really does matter.

[Slide 12]

What should we do about it?

We've established that librarians are unfairly portrayed by the mass media, and that in general the stereotyping is negative. I've explained why I think we can't just adopt an attitude of 'we don't care what you think of us', as negative perceptions effect our service delivery and recruitment to the profession. So what can we do about it?

It's hard to imagine any kind coordinated strategy at all, and certainly not one that isn't completely crass and self-defeating. A librarian promoting road-show, an advertising campaign, reality TV? All have the potential to do more harm than good, so a 'stunt' approach doesn't seem the right way forward.

Cynthia Shamel does suggest a coordinated and highly developed marketing strategy in her paper *Building a Brand: Got Librarian?*¹⁰ It is too comprehensive to go into detail here, and some of the things she suggests are quite far beyond what most of us can realistically expect to do, for example:

⁹ Danskin, Alan (2006) "*Tomorrow never knows:*" *the end of cataloguing?* Address to World Library and Information Congress. Accessible via www.ifla.org/IV/ifla72/papers/102-Danskin-en.pdf - page 4

¹⁰ Shamel, Cynthia (2002) 'Building a brand: Got librarian?' *Searcher* Vol 10, no 7. Accessible via <http://www.infotoday.com/searcher/jul02/shamel.htm>

[Slide 13]

Strategy: Communicate the skills and value an information professional can offer.

Sample tactics:

- Create or identify "a story" and write for publications the customers read, such as *Fortune* and *Business Week*. Be able to quantify and illustrate the value.
- Develop relationships with thought leaders in business and in the customer's industry. Assist thought leaders in writing and speaking on behalf of the information professional (valuable thought leaders include Peter Drucker, Tom Peters, Jack Welch, Tim Berners-Lee, Michael Porter).

(From Shamel's *Building a brand: Got librarian?*)

I don't want to appear un-ambitious but I'm not sure I'll be creating stories for *Business Week* any time soon. However, Shamel does make some excellent suggestions, such as having marketing as a core module in library school programmes; not just marketing library resources, but marketing ourselves as Information Professionals. She also emphasises the importance of positioning librarians as 'the primary conduit for the transmission of information from wherever it exists to wherever it is needed'. This sounds like what we already try and do, but Shamel is talking about wider public perception; in the same way everyone knows they should contact an accountant for financial advice or a lawyer for legal guidance, they must think first of the librarian when they want *authoritative information*.

Shamel ends her paper with the following:

[Slide 14]

The Marketing Mission

Librarians have a unique and important role in the scheme of human endeavor. Take every opportunity and every means available to communicate that role. Employ the techniques of service marketing, exploit the stereotypes, and coordinate efforts. This can be done.

(From Shamel's *Building a brand: Got librarian?*)

As I've indicated, I'm not sure how realistic a coordinated effort is, or how positive it would actually be exploit the stereotypes rather than make every effort to transcend them entirely. Otherwise though, I am in full agreement with what she says. Ultimately, it is down to us (particularly *us* – as new professionals who will shape the Information Profession in years to come) to ensure others recognise the importance of what we do, that we don't conform to the stereotypes, and that the nature of information provision and information workers is changing. Those outside the profession are struggling to catch up with who we really are and what we really do in the 21st century, so we must update them whenever we can – as Shamel says, taking every opportunity and every means available.

Of course, the most common opportunity is in the day-to-day interaction we have with our customers. There is an old sporting cliché – you are only as good as your last game. We are only as good as our last customer interaction – every single thing we do must be customer focussed, positive, and reflect the role of the modern information professional. It really is the primary weapon we have in our armoury, with which to shake off the old associations that cling to our building, and so also to us.

This is summed by a colleague of mine, Dan Pullinger, in his MA dissertation:

[Slide 15]

In *Information and Library Manager* 5(3) 1985, Esteve-Coll states, "The library is not an abstraction. It has an identity, an identity created by the staff contact with the users." The main product we offer is service, and the way we deliver that service determines how we are judged.

(From Pullinger's *An investigation into the existence of a relationship between student perception of academic librarians and uptake of the services they offer*)

We all have a responsibility, then, in delivering our services in such a way that can't illicit anything other than positive judgement.

Thank you for listening.