Two Sides of the Same Coin: Serving the Patrons as Librarians and Archivists

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Abstract

This essay seeks to address the apparent divide between librarians and archivists, and in particular to educate professionals within the respective fields as to both the origin of the gap and the misconception behind it; that librarians serve the patron and archivists serve the collection. The difference appears to stem from the opposing goals of their foundational principles; however, upon closer examination it is evident that the two groups work toward a common objective. This essay argues that their means are separate only because of the difference in the materials they care for, and the end that they both strive for is the same; getting as much information to as many patrons as possible.

Keywords: Library theory, Archive theory, Librarians, Archivists, Archives in libraries, Librarians as public servants, Archivists as public servants

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Introduction

On the surface, it appears that librarians and archivists share a similar field of work, to the point where it is likely that the average person would assume they perform more or less the same job. Why, then, is there an unspoken undercurrent of professional friction between the two disciplines? Both broadly fall under an information provider heading, yet there appears to be a disconnect between the two professions. This essay argues that librarians and archivists do in fact share a common goal: to serve the patron. The dissonance comes from the opposing methods they use to do so, going all the way to the baseline theory for each.

In a sense, librarians are more easily understood by the general public due simply to a greater exposure. This is also due in part to the fact that the foundational principles for librarians, as outlined by S.R. Ranganathan in 1931, are all explicitly service-based. Out of the five laws, only one is phrased in any way to do with the library itself. The rest are about either the book or the user. Libraries have been around a long time, they have always existed as a way to store information and make it available to people who need or want to access it. The service aspect is obvious and easy to spot.

Archivists' professional goals are also based in service but in a more round-about way. The three foundational principles for archivists all focus on servicing the collection, not the user (Millar, 2010). However, by prioritizing the needs of the materials over the needs of the patron, archivists are ensuring the longevity of the collections and therefore their continued accessibility. This guarantees that the greatest number of possible patrons, in the end, are served. It may be less obvious, but archivists focus on serving the patron just as much as librarians do.

Though librarians and archivists have foundational theories that are diametrically opposed, individuals who work in these two fields ultimately strive toward the same goals of service and accessibility. Both seek to provide their user base with as much access to materials as possible. Librarians do so at the occasional sacrifice of their collections while archivists must prioritize their collections in order to serve the highest number of patrons, both present and future.

Literature Review

The stark differences between professions is almost something of a running joke among the archive and library communities; the impression given is that the two will clash when asked to work together. *Archives in Libraries*, a 2015 SAA publication, states: "Their divergent histories, professional identities, and education continue to be factors in their ability to work together" (Bastian et al., p. 12). Katherine Timms (2009) and William Maher (1990) both play on the idea of a "sibling rivalry" between librarians and archivists in the titles of their articles, "New Partnerships for Old Sibling Rivals: The Development of Integrated Access Systems for the Holdings of Archives, Libraries, and Museums" and "Improving Archives-Library Relations: User-Centered Solutions to a Sibling Rivalry" respectively. Maher references "tensions" between the two groups several times, and goes so far as to refer to them as "A key characteristic of archives-library relations" (pp. 355-356).

In her article "Transcending Silos, Developing Synergies: Libraries and Archives," Gillian Oliver (2010) calls the relationship "contested ground" and says "While there is competition for jurisdiction it is very hard to admit that we can learn anything from each other, thus librarians and archivists will tend to remain in their

institutional silos" (p. 3). Additionally, Hansel Cook (2005), in his preliminary study published under the title "Librarians and Archivists, Archivists and Librarians: What's the Connection?", finds that archivists working in small archives within a library setting feel there is a "lack of value" given to them and their collections by their librarian colleagues (p. 71).

Aside from the culture of competition, most of the literature about the point where libraries and archives intersect emphasize that the way the different institutions go about achieving their goals necessarily diverge due to practical matters, such as the materials they care for. Robert Martin (2007), in his article "Intersecting Missions Converging Practices," says "For at least the last century or more, librarians, archivists, and museum professionals...have typically viewed the agencies and collections that they manage as distinct...usually based on the nature of their respective collections" (p. 81). In the article, this distinction is due to the fact that members of the public broadly fail to recognize the minutia that differentiates the fields, which is otherwise obvious to the people working in them.

The article "Almost, but not quite, entirely unlike libraries" also uses the particulars of materials to identify the professional divergence. The author, Stacy Etheridge (2012), points out that materials in a library have importance and significance by themselves while archival materials have importance only because of the larger record it is a part of. Her focus is less on the necessity of preserving the physical form of a specific book and more on the realities of the vast difference between the kinds of materials an archive holds and the kinds of materials a library does. She later goes on to state that the difference dictates actions and values in the respective institutions, saying

> It isn't that libraries want to spend extra money replacing items that go missing, just that it probably will not be difficult to reacquire published items that are widely available. Archives want their collections to be used, too, but they most definitely do not want them to be borrowed or circulated. (Etheridge, 2012, p. 20)

Emphasizing the practical needs that have directed the divergence in the professions, Gillian Oliver (2010) says "The nature of archival records, and the diverse profiles of the communities they serve combine to ensure that repository types have not developed in the same way as libraries" (p. 4). William Maher (1990) agrees, citing that the "daily work" of archivists and librarians "…is sufficiently different to suggest that separate techniques are needed" (p. 359). Wendy Duff (2013), in her article "From Coexistence to Convergence, Information Research," finds that the practical needs dictate the professional culture as well, saying "That they share common functions belies the differences in professional practices, training, and organizational methods that largely constitute and differentiate these fields today" (paras. 2).

Duff et al. (2013) pinpoints the primary difference as "Archives traditionally are concerned with security, privacy and protection of material while libraries are committed to optimizing access" (paras. 59). The point of divergence, from a more theoretical standpoint for each profession, is that archives function on a collection-first system while libraries work on a patron-first one. *Archives in Libraries* states "With overriding service priorities, librarians focus on the ethics of sharing information...For archivists, the inherent tension between the needs associated with the materials and the needs associated with the users constitutes the majority of ethical conflicts and issues" (Bastian et al., 2015, p. 92). Cook (2005) puts it bluntly as "The service-oriented library world will

understandably have a higher profile (and be valued more by others) than the document-oriented world of archives."(p. 71), highlighting both the difference in focus and one source of animosity between the two groups.

Despite the obvious gaps, these authors also acknowledge that libraries and archives share a common goal of information access and service to the public. Etheridge (2012) says broadly that "The primary similarity between libraries and archives is that they both revolve around information—collecting it, organizing it, sharing it" (p.18). Katherine Timms (2009) agrees, stating "While archives, libraries, and museums have significant differences, they share significant similarities in their cultural heritage mandates: to protect, preserve, and provide access to cultural heritage resources." (p. 91) Martin (2007) is more specific when he points out "It seems clear to me that libraries, archives, and museums are all social agencies that are collectively responsible for preserving the shared knowledge of humankind, making it available for everyone to use, and transmitting it to future generations" (p. 87). *Archives in Libraries* is the most succinct with "Overall, archivists and librarians in both academic and public libraries share at least one important goal: service — to their users, their institutions, and to their communities" (Bastian et al., 2015, p. 17).

The majority of the literature concurs that libraries and archives function on differing foundational principles and practices. Alternatively, most also agree that librarians and archivists are both service-oriented in their goals. However, none of the papers in the published literature draw a connection between the two, arguing instead for commonalities in spite of the division. This article makes the argument that it is the core difference between the foundational theories of each that ultimately leads to the shared

goal of service: the division is the reason for the similarity. It is only through prioritizing the collection that an archivist can fill the needs of the most patrons while a librarian may simply prioritize the patron to achieve the same end.

Foundations of Library Science

Librarians operate on the basis of five basic principles proposed by S.R. Ranganathan in 1931, known as the "Five Laws of Library Science." For the purposes of this article, the "laws" will be phrased according to a more modern interpretation proposed by Carol Simpson in 2008 which acknowledges that present-day libraries are made up of more than simply books, but the basis for the original theory remains Ranganathan's. As *Archives in Libraries* states, "Ranganathan's five laws...are rooted in service, societal good, and the public welfare" (Bastian et al., 2015, p. 19). Four out of the five laws explicitly reference a patron, a member of the general public, and their use of the library materials.

The first law is "Media are for use" (Ranganathan, 1931, p. 1; Simpson, 2008). The idea presented here is that the material kept and curated by a library is specifically meant to be used by the public. Therefore, any effort to curb access is contrary to the fundamental reason for the library's existence in the first place. Keeping patrons from reaching the media in the library, either in a literal closed stacks scenario or through censorship, is directly contradictory to what the material was put there for.

For example, when a librarian puts up a book display in a public library that features new books, the exhibited items are not then restricted from patron access. A browser could just as easily pick a book up from the display and check it out as they could a book within the stacks, the exhibit does not cause the material to become a

limited access item.

The second law is "Every patron his information" (Ranganathan, 1931, p. 74; Simpson, 2008). This principle is based around the idea that a library has something to offer every patron that enters the library. Each person is an individual with unique needs, and Ranganathan implies that each one can be catered to or supported by a library resource. This law urges librarians to spend time with their patrons and to know their collection well enough that they can give specific recommendations based on what that person would like to know.

This is the reasoning behind a varied and unbiased collection. It is not enough for public libraries to simply stock the shelves with materials on a certain topic, the material needs to be accessible by a large number of patrons with different needs. For instance, materials on paleontology have to be able to be accessed by children just learning about the subject, high school teenagers writing an essay for an assignment, adults in the field wanting to read their own professional literature, and casual patrons who are looking for adventurous fiction.

The third law is "Every medium its user" (Ranganathan, 1931, p. 299; Simpson, 2008). Not only is Ranganathan postulating that the media in a library has been put there to be used, he states that all of it should be used. Just as every patron has unique needs that must be considered and that can be met by the materials kept in a library, each piece of media in a library was designed or created with a specific purpose in mind that can be fulfilled by the use of a patron. This law promotes the idea that the materials curated by librarians are there for a reason, and that reason is to disseminate information.

This law is part of the logic behind acquiring audiobooks. Some library patrons

may be blind and find it more desirable to consume their books by listening rather than reading braille. Some patrons may find they lack the time to read a book in the traditional way and prefer to listen to books on their daily commute. Some patrons may be facing a long road trip and are looking for a way to entertain small children on the drive. At any rate, a library obtaining audiobook copies of an item that is already on the shelves finds its root in Ranganathan's third law.

The fourth law is "Save the time of the patron" (Ranganathan, 1931, p. 336; Simpson, 2008). This law is perhaps the most obviously public-oriented of the five; similar to the idea that the point of keeping media is so that people can use it, the fourth law states that the purpose of a library is to prioritize the needs of the patron. The focus should be on easing the user experience, not making it difficult to access the materials.

There are parallels to the first law in the idea of not closing the stacks to browsers, but this law can also be applied in cataloging and overall organization of materials. The fourth law is why specialized libraries will use a different cataloging method than a public library, because a public library's classification system is designed to apply to many different topics while a special library needs to be able to catalog material broadly falling under the same topic. By using a different system, the organization in the special library will make more sense and be easier to access. This law is also the logic behind separating material in a public library based on format; it saves the time of the patron to be able to go straight to the DVDs if all they're looking for is a movie to watch over the weekend.

The fifth law is "The library is a growing organism" (Ranganathan, 1931, p. 382; Simpson, 2008). This is the only law that is not immediately recognizable as service

oriented, but it is in fact a result of maintaining the other four laws. The library must be recognized as a growing, changing thing in order to properly uphold the ideals stated in the previous four laws. This law has become especially relevant with the advent of the Digital Age and in times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, where access for patrons is shaped by the technology available. Access can have a variety of meanings outside of allowing patrons physical entrance to the building and stacks, and with advances in technology libraries have been able to serve more patrons in an increasing number of ways. Electronic media such as ebooks and digital audiobooks have enabled distance access that was not possible before, and wifi hotspots along with laptop loaning programs have facilitated information access in a way that some patrons may only be able to achieve at a library.

With all five of Ranganathan's laws, the benefit to the patron is undeniable. Service to the general public and any who might use the library is clearly the directive that is the foundation for the theory that drives librarians in their duties. With archives and archivists, the focus is slightly different.

Foundations of Archival Science

Archivists have three foundational directives that are taught as part of the theory that forms the profession; provenance, original order, and respect de fonds. Contrary to the Five Laws of Library Science, these principles are focused on the collection rather than any and all patrons that the archivist may serve. But it does not mean that an archivist loses sight of the living quality of the records, the creators of the records, or the archive itself. *Archives in Libraries* points out "Thinking like an archivist means seeing records as organic" (Bastian et al., 2015, p. 20). All three principles, while collection

focused, are designed to retain the elasticity inherent in a collection that does not have value in isolation.

Provenance, as defined by Laura Millar (2010) in *Archives: Principles and Practices*, relates "...to who created records or used them at the time of their creation" (p. 97). It functions as an extension of the original context of the materials, in essence the date, location, and owner surrounding the creation of the records, and is what gives the information contained in the materials its value. As *Archives in Libraries* says "any group of records are part of a larger story...that can only be truly understood in relationship to the creators of the records and the wider societal context in which that creator lives" (Bastian et al., 2015, p. 20).

For example, a collection contains a date book. The creator of the book was perhaps careless in writing down appointments; it refers to people by first name or nickname only, and incomplete dates are given throughout. If the creator of the collection is known to be an elected official and the dates of the collection cover the period of time they were in office, the provenance of the appointment book becomes critical to correctly identifying the information inside it.

Original order, defined as referring "...to the physical and intellectual structure in which records were created, used, filed, and kept" (Miller, 2010, p. 97), is a much more delicate and unfortunately nebulous principle than provenance. Not every collection has an original order, and sometimes the original order is too specific to the mind of the creator either to be recognized by the processing archivist or to be feasibly usable by researchers. Sometimes the collection may be incomplete upon donation and the original order has already been disturbed. Nevertheless, it is important wherever possible to

maintain any original order that a collection possesses as the original order provides an important context that only the creator can give. As the *Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives* says:

> The penalty for forcing the archival collection into an alien mold is not long in coming; while on the one hand the system helps the searcher by pointing out to him immediately the section which he must consult, on the other it turns him aside from the right path. (Muller, 1898/1968, p. 54)

For instance, a donated collection contains a series of letters written to the creator from various people over the years. The original order of the letters has them arranged first by the person who sent it, then by date. The letters could be rearranged to be completely chronological by an archivist, but that would disrupt the logical original order wherein a direct thread of conversation by a single person is being upheld. Alternatively, the letters could also be rearranged to be completely alphabetical by the last name of the sender, but what if one of the correspondents had at one point married? Now a single person's letters have been divided into two different places, again disrupting the thread of conversation present in the original order.

Respect des fonds combines the two ideas of original order and provenance. It is defined by Laura Millar (2010) as implying that "...all archives from one particular creator or source (provenance) must be kept together as a unified whole...and that all archives within that unified whole should be preserved in the order in which they were made and used (original order)" (p. 97). *Respect des fonds* is essentially the principle that dictates how archivists process and arrange collections. In an article for *Archivaria*, Michel Duchein (1983) says, "General classification by *fonds* is the only really correct

one in assuring the prompt carrying out of a regular and uniform order…. If...one proposes a theoretical order…the archives will fall into a disorder which will be difficult to correct" (p. 66). The idea is that the context of the creation and organization of a record is more important and relevant to its value than the very basic human desire to put like with like.

For example, if several different collections contain correspondence via postcard it is considered irresponsible of the archivist to remove all the postcards from the independent collections in order to create one single postcard collection. Not only has the context of the creator been erased from the individual postcards and potentially made the information contained on them nonsense in the process, researchers interested in the individual collections now miss part of the correspondence that had been a part of that particular creator's records.

While all of these principles objectively focus on the materials, what the actual result is when they are adhered to is a collection that retains its full potential and value to the patron. The attention to the materials results overall in the patrons benefitting. The logic seems backwards when comparing archival theory to library theory, but when examined more closely it becomes apparent that the discrepancy comes as a result of the nature of the materials that are kept and collected in archives and libraries.

Nature of Materials

Libraries keep and care for materials that are frequently published works. The intent is to allow the public access to a vast amount of information that they would otherwise have to purchase; the entire point of a library is to remove restrictions from their collection. The collection is for the most part replaceable because they are published

works and are available in more than one place. The public is best served by being unfettered with respect to accessing the materials because there is no need to preserve the materials themselves in order to make sure their use will continue.

Archives keep and care for materials that are frequently unique by nature. The intent is to allow the public access to information that they would not have otherwise been able to see due to its unpublished nature; the entire point of an archive is to make its collection available for the most amount of people for the longest amount of time. The materials are for the most part irreplaceable; they exist only in that archive in the form which they were donated. The public is best served by the collections being protected by restrictions that will ultimately prolong their existence for more people to be able to access them.

This necessary protection of the physical form has another layer; archival materials have what is known as "intrinsic value". Laura Millar (2010) defines it as "The worth of a unit of archival material that is associated with the unit's physical qualities...These qualities are inherent...and mean that keeping the archives in their original physical form is the most acceptable form of preservation" (p. 265). In archives the physical form of the records themselves, whatever medium that may be, has value in and of itself. In libraries, the value is in the information contained within the record, not in the physical form of the record. As such, it doesn't matter whether a patron accesses that information in a physical paper book, an audiobook on cassette tape, or an ebook. The information is the record and that is preserved regardless. In an archival context, each of those three formats is its own record independent of any information stored on them.

The paper book is a record of the physical book-making process. For example, how is it bound? What kind of paper are the pages made of? What font was used for the text? Was it written in? The answers to these questions, along with the provenance of that particular book and the context of when it was written, make the physical form of the book itself have value separate from the information within it.

The audiobook on tape is an example of a mostly obsolete technology, and therefore the physical form is a record independent of the information on the tape. What size are the cassettes and what are they made of? How are they stored together? What company is responsible for the recording and distribution? Who is narrating the book? These questions address the context behind the creation of the physical form of the audio book, and they cannot be answered by the text of the book alone.

The digital form of the ebook has its importance too. Is it compatible with more than one kind of e-reader? Is it downloadable on a desktop? If so, what format does it download as? Is it loaned to the library or does the library have ownership of a copy? The ebook is a record of the development of digital technology and how that has changed access for patrons, and details about its format are crucial markers in understanding the progression over the years.

In an archive, the presence of each of the three mediums answers a different set of possible questions a patron may have. *Understanding Archives and Manuscripts* says "For the archivist, records perform not merely one service but a whole range of them, some of which cannot be anticipated in advance. Making that variety of use possible...is the archivist's goal" (O'Toole & Cox, 2006, p. 87). In a library, the presence of three different mediums of one book may serve the needs of three different patrons, thus

fulfilling the second and/or third law, but the formats are not valued for their form independent of the information stored on them.

That being the case, the preservation of the materials within an archive takes on a new importance. In a library, it doesn't matter so much that a book was dropped in a lake by a vacationing patron, or that a DVD was scratched beyond use by a family pet. The items are replaceable and it is ultimately the information stored on the format that is what needs to be preserved and made available. Current patrons may be temporarily inconvenienced, but ultimately the information lost will be available somewhere else. In an archive, if part of a collection is damaged or lost or stolen it is irreplaceable. Not only does this affect current patrons, it means that future patrons will be unable to access the information that was lost.

Besides the intrinsic value of archival materials, the other main reason archivists must restrict access to their collections by patrons is that the collections are difficult to "browse" successfully. A library, for the most part, consists of independent works that are cataloged and organized for easy access by patrons. Ranganathan (1931) says, "In an open access library, the reader is permitted to wander among the books and lay his hands on any of them at his will and pleasure" (p. 300). Archival collections are made up of many interrelated items that are part of the context of a larger whole that makes them difficult to look at in small parts already, but they are also unbound for the most part and that makes the sort of casual browsing Ranganathan is suggesting extremely unfeasible.

A collection of papers is metaphorically comparable to a book with all its pages removed and placed in separate folders, with no page numbers, and stored in boxes that are uniform with all other collections in the archive. Unless a person knows exactly what

the record is they need and precisely where it is in the stacks, finding it is exceptionally difficult. In order to keep the collection in a useable state for other researchers, archives typically restrict access to their stacks in a way that most libraries do not. It is simply more practical to allow only trained archivists to browse the manuscript material as the chances of a document or folder becoming misplaced and removed from its context increases dramatically otherwise.

All these things being given, the nature of the types of materials in both libraries and archives dictates the diametric nature of the focus of the foundational theories for each. Libraries and librarians can afford to focus solely on the needs of their patrons, for archivists and archives to do likewise would be to sacrifice their materials. Nevertheless, by catering to the needs of the collection over the needs of the patron archivists are able to serve more researchers than they would otherwise be able to.

Serving the Patron

When arguing for the relevance of the first law (media are for use), Ranganathan (1931) discusses libraries with closed stacks that disallow patrons from controlling their own user experience. He asks, "What must have been the purpose of such preservation? It is difficult to think of any purpose except that of preserving for the use of posterity" (Ranganathan, 1931, p. 2). For a library such a preventative action makes no sense. The materials are not unique, they can usually be acquired again if a replacement is needed, and to block a patron from accessing them is counterproductive. Such a barrier actually violates the fourth law, "save the time of the patron". For archives "preserving for the use of posterity" is the main drive behind every "restriction" placed on the materials.

Historic material such as the stuffed toys belonging to Chistopher Robin Milne

would not have survived to modern times if the handling of them had continued according to the original intent rather than being protected and preserved at one point in their history. The stuffed animals that inspired the *Winnie the Pooh* series by A.A. Milne are, essentially, toys that were intended to be played with. Indeed in their original life as playthings, one animal was lost in an apple orchard and the entire collection was played with by both Christopher and the family dog ("The Adventures of the REAL Winnie-the-Pooh," n.d.).

Because of their historic significance due to their relation to the beloved children's book series, they have been preserved by preventing as much physical interaction as possible to keep them from deteriorating any further. Modern and future generations have an opportunity to view the original Tigger and Pooh where they are displayed behind glass in the children's center in the New York Public Library only because past generations were not allowed physical access to them ("The Adventures of the REAL Winnie-the-Pooh," n.d.).

Christopher Robin Milne's toys are a famous example, but the same principle applies to "mundane" materials in everyday archival collections. Letters need to be delicately handled, photographs need minimal light exposure, books need cradles, and scrapbooks need gloves, all because the unique materials will only survive to serve more patrons' needs if these precautions are kept to begin with.

Serving a library patron, while perhaps not easy, is relatively simple. A librarian's job is to facilitate access in as many ways possible to as many patrons as possible. By nature of their collection materials this takes the form of lending items, curating their collections in accordance with their institution's policy, and organizing the stacks in a

way that is intuitive for browsers.

Archivists appear to do the opposite, restricting the use of their materials to the reading room and closing their stacks to browsers for example, but it is because archival patrons are best served overall by looking at the big picture. In his article for the *American Archivist*, "When Archivists and Digital Asset Managers Collide: Tensions and Ways Forward," Anthony Cocciolo (2016) says "Archivists tend to take a longer view of at least a couple decades and do not necessarily think the content itself is the most important thing" (p. 131).

Facilitating access to collections is as integral to the job of an archivist as it is to librarians. The difference is that future patrons are being taken into account as well as current patrons, both of whom need to use a limited resource. If a scrapbook's pages fall out of order because it was handled too roughly, there is no way for any researcher who comes to the archive after that point to be able to experience and extract the information that was present in that item when it was created. In essence, an archivist's job is less an emphasis on restriction and more on moderation when it comes to exposing the materials to physical access from patrons.

Conclusion

While archives and libraries do certainly have diverging foundational theories and practices, this ultimately stems from the disparate nature of the materials under the care and keeping of archivists and librarians and not from opposing goals. Both professions aim to serve their patrons as best they can, and both ultimately share the same fundamental belief. *Archives in Libraries* points out "Thinking in both professions includes a commitment to the power of information...a belief that everyone has a right to

pursue knowledge and that a primary responsibility of an information professional is to provide access to knowledge" (Bastian et al., 2015, p. 21).

Librarians work with published materials that are largely replaceable. The best way they can serve their patrons is by prioritizing their needs; as a result, Ranganathan's five laws of library science are all clearly public-oriented rather than collection-oriented. Archivists work with unpublished collections, the majority of which are unique and irreplaceable. The best way to serve as many researchers as possible is to prioritize the needs of the materials to ensure they last longer; as a result the three main archival principles are collection focused rather than patron focused out of necessity.

Librarians serve the patron by catering directly to them. Archivists serve the patron by catering to the collection, thereby guaranteeing that researchers will continue to have access to the delicate materials under their care long beyond the point that normal wear and tear would have rendered them unusable. Ultimately, both archivists and librarians aim to bolster knowledge and provide information to as many people as possible, and it is this shared end that makes the differing means to achieve it matter less.

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