Alternative Libraries as Heterotopias: Challenging Conventional Constructs of Library Service

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Extended Abstract
This paper addresses general issues in the world of library services, as invited by the LIDA call for papers, by asking: "How are we to understand new or transformed library services in their own right, or in relation to traditional library services and values?" It adopts a philosophical perspective on the nature and role of so-called traditional library services by considering them in contradistinction with what we term as “alternative libraries.”

Alternative libraries are here defined in a relational sense, positioned as decidedly not-conventional and non-traditional in their operational mission. In describing conventional libraries, the most apt definition comes from Shera’s (1970) “libraries as social agencies” construction, which assumes a United States orientation of libraries as places that instill, reify, or encourage community values, both through collection development and library services, such as reference, reader’s advisory, instruction, and all types of programs. In contrast, in the last few years, there has been an emergence of alternative libraries that deliberately play with and reorient traditional librarianship as part of a philosophical and/or artistic project, such as Julia Weist’s and Mayaan Pearl’s “The Public Library of American Public Library Deaccession” (2011; see also Radford, Radford, and Lingel, 2012). This approach is, we argue, more mischievous, playful and ultimately disruptive, at least in terms of what it means to be a library.

Using Michel Foucault’s (1986) notion of heterotopia as our guide, we examine how alternative libraries challenge conventional notions of librarianship, in turn allowing us to reconsider the role of library services in a postmodern world. Heterotopia are a particular kind of site that have “the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invent the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect” (Foucault, 1986, p. 24). Foucault clearly states that heterotopia are real places and not conceptual abstractions. He describes them as “something like counter-sites” in which other real sites can be “represented, contested, and inverted” (Foucault, 1986, p. 24).

The alternative library acts as such a counter-site. They are real spaces which “represent” the space and functions of the traditional library (they have books, catalogs, classification systems, and so on). At the same time, they simultaneously “contest” and “invert” these functions. The material existence of the alternative library has the potential to unsettle librarian stereotypes, challenge notions of the library as an institutional authority of knowledge,
and acknowledge the potential pluralities of social spaces in terms of the multiple ways these libraries are used. Questions raised by the existence and experience of alternative libraries include: What are the obligations of libraries in terms of serving their surrounding community? What services should be provided? What kinds of collection development policies provide the best (or most needed?) materials?

**Keywords**
Alternative Libraries, Michel Foucault, Heterotopia

**References**


