

Articles / Artículos

An anti-capitalist critique to the commodification and privatization of information in libraries funded by the public sector,¹ by: Zapopan Martin Muela-Meza (MEXICO) ²

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Abstract

This essay criticises some of the adverse effects of the governments when they privatise and commodify the information financed by the public purse, such as the double increasing of that information that has already been funded by public funds when the researchers have already been paid, and then their publications are being sold by commercial enterprises whose results had already been generated and financed by government public funds.

Keywords

Public information sector; critical librarianship; commodification of public information; privatisation of public information.

Título: Una crítica anti-capitalista a la comercialización y privatización de la información en bibliotecas financiadas por el sector público.

Resumen

Este ensayo critica algunos de los efectos dañinos cuando los gobiernos privatizan y mercantilizan la información financiada por el erario público, tales como el doble encarecimiento de la misma que ya ha sido financiada con fondos públicos al ser remunerados los investigadores y luego que sus publicaciones sean vendidas por empresas cuyos resultados ya habían sido generados y financiados con fondos gubernamentales.

Palabras clave

Bibliotecología; bibliotecología crítica; mercantilismo informacional; privatización informacional.

“Money just appeals to selfishness, and irresistibly invites to abuse. Could anybody imagine Moses, Christ, or Gandhi armed with the sacks of money of Carnegie?” (Einstein, 1934: 13).

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Introduction

There is abundant evidence in the literature that privatization of the provision of social services in any capitalist nation has run parallel to the development of capitalism and thus the enclosures of the land of the commons in order to build capitalist industries (Marx, 1959a; 1959b; 1959c; Bakan, 2004; May, 2004).

A LIS commentator mentions that in Sheffield, UK, for example, the Sheffield Water Company provided water services to the public until 1888 when the City Council took over. It is argued that a fatal accident by this company in 1864 in which 248 people were drowned sparked the big danger that such vital service had been provided by private companies (Olive, 2002).

Another LIS researcher (Vestheim, 1997) suggests that the advent of public library provision follows a similar pattern. He points out that the first public libraries in the world were founded by voluntary bourgeois class people in the late 18th century. During those days, he states, *public* meant *open* or *accessible* for the public but they were owned by private people; hence privatized. It was not until late 19th century that *public libraries* began to be taken over by local governments or municipalities and hence *public libraries* began to be associated with *state-related* or *government-related* (Vestheim, 1997: 120). However, the author has maintained somewhere else (Muela-Meza, 2015; 2006; 2005; 2004) that what has prevailed throughout the human oral and written history is the *privatization* of information, knowledge, and library provision, that is, the information kept in private hands away from the general public. Even with the advent of the early bourgeois public libraries identified by Vestheim (1997), they might have meant public, open and accessible, but only those who could afford to pay their services could access them.

Controversial issues on the commodification and privatization of the provision of information services to the public

It is believed that in public libraries in the European scenarios their readers do not need to pay any extra taxes to read books. That may be the case for those types of facilities, but through the Sheffield, UK City Council libraries citizens, for instance on the surface, readers do not need to pay an extra tax to borrow books, other than the normal taxes they pay to the government, e.g. land use, water bills, and the like.³ This fact may be true when assessed only at the surface. But when analysed at deeper levels the taxpayers are not only paying their regular taxes for their right to be informed through public libraries, but also they are paying for newer and more controversial taxes such as the tax of book lending being imposed through the European Union 1992/100 directive based on the so called “Intellectual Property” laws.

³ Actually, they do have to pay to the library they visit only to borrow CDs, DVDs, and very few other services such as photocopy machines and the like, but not for books loans.

The author of this paper (Muela, et.al. 2006b), in co-authorship with other researchers from *The Copy/South International Research Group*,⁴ found that the British government, for instance, at central and local levels, in compliance with such EU 1992/100 directive, is taxing all the books bought and lent throughout all the public libraries in the country. That is, every time a book is lent to a user through any British public library –or through any other library from any other EU country—the taxpayers have to pay an extra tax to the copyright holders of that book. E.g. if the Harry Potter books are borrowed, for instance, one million times a month, then one million times the British taxpayers have to pay an extra tax in compliance with the EU 1992/100 directive.

And the author (Muela-Meza, 2006a, 2005) found that the Spanish taxpayers have to pay to copyright holders about € 1 euro per each book lent through their public libraries. That is, with this example, if British readers borrow 1 million times the Harry Potter books in a month, then taxpayers (whom not necessarily have to be the same readers, e.g. children might be library members, but not taxpayers, but their parents are) have to pay € 1 million euros (€ 1,000,000.00 euros) a month to the copyright holders of the Harry Potter book. Copyright holders claim that such EU 1992/100 directive tax on public library lending and reading is to benefit the authors by rewarding their “creative” skills, but that tax benefits mainly the copyright holders not the authors, and these copyright holders are mainly big global multi-million corporations (Muela, et.al. 2006b).

A Spanish LIS researcher from the Universidad Complutense (Gimeno Perelló, 2007) elaborates on this idea. He has found in an European-wide study that such EU 100/1992 directive has been the main cause in the UK for the reduction of a 30% of book lending in 2003 with regards with a previous decade:

“At the same time, the number of book loans in the British libraries descended until 30% in 2003 in relation with the previous decade: from 563 million loans in 1993 they descended to 406 million in 2003. These are direct consequences of the application of the European Directive [100/1992 on *Intellectual Property taxes on library book lending*]” (Gimeno Perelló, 2007)

Furthermore, he also found that even in the case that authors received the “benefits” of the EU 100/1992 directive through the British copyright law, that distribution was enormously unequal:

“In the UK, during the 2002-2003 period, 67% of the British authors obtained a profit of less than 143 euros, whilst a 1.3% obtained the maximum benefit stipulated by the Law: 8, 663 euros” (Gimeno Perelló, 2007).

⁴ The Copy/South Research Group was an anti intellectual property international non government organisation founded and chaired by Alan Story a professor from the Kent School of Law at the Kent University, Canterbury, Kent, UK in 2005, and the author participated in the Kent, UK 2005 and Kerala, India 2008 anti intellectual property workshops.

For instance one of those writers, who belong to the 1.3% maximum benefit of € 8, 663 euros plus the regular royalties, is the children's writer Jacqueline Wilson, who has been the most borrowed author in the UK for the fourth year in succession and catalogued as the Children's Laureate (Jury and Brown, 2007). According to the press this author apparently is very concerned for the closure of many British libraries and she wishes that more money be invested in the libraries:

"I think it's appalling that so many libraries are being closed. What does it say about us and our culture?," she said. "I feel that libraries and librarians are such a valuable part of our life. I just want more money invested so that libraries can be open and more accessible." (Jury and Brown, 2007).

However, what the author has found more appalling is that journalists and writers do not make any correlation of how while authors are being the most borrowed (for instance Jacqueline Wilson was borrowed more than one million times in 2005-2006) in public libraries, and therefore receiving at least 50 pence per book lent, at the same time those extra taxes emanated from the EU 1992/100 directive of tax on reading in libraries that taxpayers pay is money that could be invested in libraries to keep them open, better staffed and stocked; and for the matter to invest and create many other new public facilities free to the public. And this is most noticeable considering that before such EU 1992/100 directive was legislated since 1992 at the EU level, but Britain had already been enforced in the British copyright law since 1978 (Gimeno Perelló, 2007).

The author has not assessed this subtle type of privatization of the British culture through libraries which authors such as Jacqueline Wilson do not address when she criticises the government for the lack of money in libraries, but the readers are invited to conduct further research, e.g. to investigate the annual correlations of who were the most borrowed authors and how much was the payment per book lent since 1978. Whatever the numbers they may find in such investigation, one constant would be clear: even if the most borrowed authors received 1 pence per book borrowed in libraries and multiplied by "n" quantity of times borrowed, that amount of money since those nearly 40 years is the amount of money that taxpayers have been paying on top of the ordinary taxes they had already paid.

To illustrate the lack of funding for public libraries another journalist (Street-Porter, 2004: 33) writes a very eloquent heading: "No wonder our libraries are in crisis" based on a report by a Libri campaign group, but she also fails to correlate the funding crisis with the UK and British people's additional tax to read in libraries which is being exacted from the taxpayers.

Logic fallacies and rhetoric ploys of the ideologues of the commodification and privatisation of information

There are many partisans of the commodification and privatisation of public funded information, outside librarianship (e.g. to mention but a few: Masuda, 1981 (Japan);

Fukuyama, 1989 (Japan); Huntington, 1993 (USA); Castells, 1996, Spain), and there are many as well within librarianship (e.g. to mention but a few: Lau Noriega, 2007^a; 2007^b (Mexico); Gorman, 2001 (USA); Hernández Pacheco, 2007; 2000 (Mexico); Uribe Tirado, 2005 (Colombia); Valdiosera, 2005 (Mexico); Delgado López-Cózar, 2001 (Spain); Rodríguez Gallardo, 2001 (Mexico); Guerrero Valle, 2000 (Mexico); Mann, 1993 (USA); Cronin, 1992, UK)

Conclusions

Therefore, if the government seems always likely of not having enough money to invest in libraries, and other documental information institutions and other social services facilities, one main cause might have to be delved into this controversial people's tax on reading in the public libraries which has been implemented since 1978 by the very same British government in the name of British taxpayers and in the name of EU taxpayers since 1992 by the European Parliament.

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