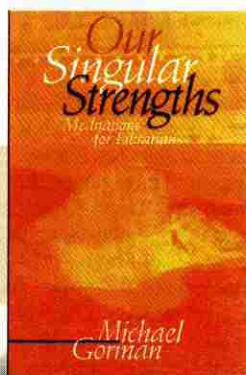


# The Five Laws of Library Science

## Then & Now

By Michael Gorman



***A librarian returns to the early philosophy of the profession, seeking wisdom amid rapid change.***

*S.R. Ranganathan, a library pioneer in India and the world, left a legacy in his concise laws for libraries, which include the oft-quoted "Every reader his book" and "Save the time of the reader." To update these philosophies for our time, Michael Gorman has fashioned his own set of five laws, which he offers, together with Ranganathan's, in a new book called Our Singular Strengths: Meditations for Librarians (ALA, 1998). The statements in italics following each law are what Gorman calls "resolutions," or challenges, which he puts to librarians.*



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### Ranganathan's Five Laws

S.R. Ranganathan invented the term *library science*. He believed that all human activities were susceptible to analysis using the scientific method and that such a careful examination of the phenomena of library work could lead to the formulation of empirical "laws." His are clearly not laws in the sense that, say, the Second Law of Thermodynamics is a law. However, they are more than mere generalities because they are founded on observation and analysis by a trained mind. (Dr. Ranganathan was originally a mathematician.) He, like that other genius of librarianship, Melvil Dewey, used high intelligence, the scientific approach, and considerable experience in his rethinking of our profession.

#### First Law

### *Books are for use*

One of the astounding things about Dr. Ranganathan's Five Laws is the depth of meaning compressed into so few words. Such concision is characteristic of Western poetry and Eastern

Protect free access to knowledge.  
Libraries serve humanity  
Books are for use  
The library is a growing organism

teaching (secular and spiritual). Even in Ranganathan's day, books were not the only documents collected by libraries, and it is wrong to conclude from his words that books were the only library materials that mattered to Ranganathan. His essential point is that libraries acquire materials and make them accessible so they can be *used*. This is the real difference between libraries and museums. With few exceptions, books and other library materials are important not as objects but for the knowledge and information they contain. Even the maintenance of unused or little-used items in research libraries must be justified in terms of potential use. For most collections in most libraries, we must heed this law and value usefulness above all else.

*I will build collections not for vanity but for use.*

## Second Law

### *Every book its reader*

Let me first update the terminology of this law. "Every item of library material its user" lacks the snap of Dr. Ranganathan's formulation but expresses modern reality better. This law teaches us two lessons. The first is that we do not acquire library materials in the abstract. Each acquisition should call to mind a potential user—by name (if something has been requested specifically) or by type. Both general and specific collection decisions are, of course, dictated by knowledge of the community the library serves. One must base decisions not only on the known community of the present but also on likely future changes in that community.

The second lesson is that even the most apt selection choices can be vitiated if they are not backed up by an efficient and user-friendly bibliographic control system. The law works both ways. Acquire only those things with potential to be used and ensure that library users can speedily and accurately locate the very material that they wish to use.

*I will add useful items to the collection and make them accessible to all.*

## Third Law

### *Every reader his book*

This law is the complementary reverse of its predecessor. As with the other laws, we need to see beyond the words to the meaning they embody. Dr. Ranganathan certainly did not mean

to imply that all "readers" (library users) are male or that only males are governed by this precept. Nor, again, did he mean that books are the only useful library materials. He did believe that reading is a most important path to learning and wisdom—a sometimes unfashionable view among the false egalitarians of today who proclaim that viewing images or manipulating computer data is the intellectual equivalent of the sustained reading of text. Leaving that aside, Ranganathan is telling us that when a library user comes to a library or gains access to library services, certain materials (textual, graphic, and/or numeric) will meet her or his needs. It is our job to ensure that the connection between Library User A and Material B is made and that connection is as speedy and practical as possible. That is why we select useful materials, create usable catalogs, provide helpful reference service, and do all the other things that add up to total library service.

Another lesson is to be found in the words "every reader." We should never forget that every single member of the community we serve is entitled to access to all our collections and to the very best service we can provide.

*I will be the connection between the users of my library and the materials they need.*

## Fourth Law

### *Save the time of the reader*

I have known libraries in which the policies and procedures seemed to be designed primarily for the benefit of library staff and administrators. In such cases, good, service-oriented librarians and staff are often hobbled in their ability to serve and benefit library users. Ranganathan's fourth law is, when properly understood and employed, a management tool of great utility. A library that examined every aspect of its policies, rules, procedures, or systems with that one simple criterion in mind—saving the time of the library users—would find the consequent changes transformational.

This is a more complicated process than it might appear. Consider these questions. Would self-charging be quicker for the library user than an efficiently run, well-staffed circulation desk? Imagine a good service-oriented supermarket. Few would think that its service would be enhanced if we had to wand and pack our own groceries. How can you run a reference desk to deliver speedier and better service without setting up potentially cumbersome queuing systems for in-depth reference service, informational questions, and telephone in-



S.R. Ranganathan

quiries? Does the speed and ease of use of academic departmental libraries outweigh their undoubted inefficiencies and expensive labor-intensiveness? Frugality with the time of others must be paramount in our decision-making process.

*I will always bear in mind that the time of library users is precious.*

### Fifth Law

## *The library is a growing organism*

The new British Library building in London is merely the largest and the latest of the many examples of the perils of ignoring this law. Thirty years plus in the planning, it was full the day it opened. Libraries do grow and change and will always do so. Compact shelving, microforms, and electronic resources might seem to imply less growth or even shrinkage, but there is no evidence that is so. Space continues to be at a premium in most libraries. To offer but one example, the ubiquity of computers in modern libraries has placed more demands on our space and infrastructure. A computer workstation and its peripherals take up far more space than a place for a person to sit to read and take notes. Books, journals, videos, and sound recordings continue to be published in great numbers, and the slowdown in the growth of many collections has been caused by financial constraints and not the availability of, or demand for, new materials. Change comes along with growth, and healthy growth implies flexibility in the use of space, the deployment of staff, and the nature of our programs.

*I will remember that libraries grow and develop and will plan accordingly.*

## Five New Laws of Librarianship

*Small people on the shoulders of giants see farther than the giants themselves.*

—Stella Didacus (Diego de Estella)

Ranganathan's Five Laws underlie my beliefs and work as a librarian. His shadow fell hugely on my library education and his influence pervaded almost all the classes I took. (One particularly enthusiastic teacher had set the Five Laws to music!) Ranganathan's work and, particularly, the 24 words of the *Laws* provided an intellectual framework for understanding all aspects of library work. It was the force behind the two most precious things we gained from library school—enthusiasm and insight. (I sometimes wonder if contemporary library education—with its emphasis on technology and “information”—can have the same beneficial results.) Given my reverence for Ranganathan, it was a potentially hubristic act to create five new laws of librarianship—not with the intent of replacing his *Laws* but as an experiment in analyzing our situation today in the light of his ideas. My new laws:

### First New Law

## *Libraries serve humanity*

*Freely we serve*

*Because we freely love, as in our will*

*To love or not; in this we stand or fall.*

—John Milton, *Paradise Lost*

Libraries are about service or they are about nothing. In everything we do, from an individual act of assistance to a library user to our collective efforts to support education and preserve knowledge for posterity, we are animated by the will to serve. What motivates the altruism, the commitment to serve, that is present in all good librarians? Not material gain or fame—librarians are overblessed with neither. There are gains, though, in successful service; psychic rewards that cannot be quantified but are no less real for that. We get those rewards daily by giving benefits to library users and the wider community; by serving individuals and serving humankind.

Before we can deliver and reap the rewards of service, we must identify the benefits that society can reasonably expect and then devise means of delivering those benefits. Service always has a purpose, and our careers of service have a purpose. They are neither menial nor small. It is hard to imagine a more worthy or nobler role in life.

*I will derive my reward from service to humanity.*

### Second New Law

## *Respect all forms by which knowledge is communicated*

*Being poor and unable to afford the amenities of wealthier Americans, I thank the public library for giving me an opportunity to enjoy the world of video ... using my library card has made my life fuller and better.*

—Bill Pease (Tacoma, WA), quoted in the ALA national campaign Libraries Change Lives

I value the electronic resources that are available in my library. I enjoy using them to locate texts and images to read and view. I look forward to the day when access to these resources is less hit-and-miss and we have reached a resolution of the difficult issues that surround them—preservation of electronic records, intellectual property, provenance, etc. When that happy day dawns, and if it is in my lifetime, I will continue to use and enjoy using sound recordings and videos and reading magazines and books.

We all, consciously or not, use different means of communication for the special value they bring to our pursuit of knowledge, information, and entertainment. Put simply, those of us privileged to have access to electronic resources use the Net to locate images, data, and brief texts, and we use books,

# Use technology intelligently to enhance service to the future Protect free access to knowledge

sound recordings, videos, etc., for study and entertainment. We know in our hearts that the power of print-on-paper to convey recorded knowledge in lengthy texts is unrivaled and will remain so. Is there a more absurd question than "Which should be supported, books or bytes?" Surely not. We should value all means of preserving and communicating the records and achievements of the human mind and heart.

*I will resist pressure to deny one useful format to patrons, in favor of another.*

## Third New Law

### Use technology intelligently to enhance service

*The technology of medicine has outgrown its sociology.*  
—Henry Sigerist, *Medicine and Human Welfare*

Technology, intelligently applied, is a wonderful, life-enhancing thing. The telephone was an almost unalloyed boon until the advent of dinner-hour telephone solicitation and restaurant diners making and receiving calls on cellular telephones. Similarly, the online catalog, now transformed into the all-singing, all-dancing online system, changed almost every aspect of librarianship for the better. Now, we have moved on from these wondrous systems to a point at which the construction of Web pages has become a consuming obsession in library schools and some libraries. It is as though we have taken useful tools and, like so many sorcerer's apprentices, caused them to run riot, dominate our libraries, and devastate our budgets. Does every employee in the library really need access to a powerful personal computer? It seems to be accepted that they do, even when the PC's main function is that of an electronic gathering place that has replaced the water cooler as the venue for non-work discussions. Technology exists to support our mission as librarians, to assist in ready and free access to recorded knowledge and information, and to deliver library service effectively. Anything beyond that is the path to dashed expectations and skewed priorities.

*I will use technology when it is useful, affordable, and cost effective.*

## Fourth New Law

### Protect free access to knowledge

*There are two good things in life—freedom of thought and freedom of action.*  
—W. Somerset Maugham, *Of Human Bondage*

Almost all librarians oppose censorship, resist the book burners and banners, and defend the First Amendment. Some, though, fail to understand the more insidious threat to intellectual free-

dom the "virtual library" represents. This may seem paradoxical, since the priests of technology preach of a coming age in which everyone is a publisher and the freedom to propagate and receive ideas is unlimited. Reality is very different.

To begin with, the Internet is by no means "free," plus it is laboring under a level of use that it was not designed to bear, and is already subject to censorship. We will soon see restrictions on access to the Net, high individual charges for that access, and monitoring of its use. Moreover, that future concerns only those with means of access. The most inflated number of those on the Net is 20 million (the number of regular, active users being much smaller). What of the other 240 million Americans? What of the uncounted millions in other countries (many of which lack regular power supply)?

The virtual library is a profoundly elitist concept, dreamed up by academics, that would exclude the bulk of Americans and the masses of people throughout the world. Do we really want a small, prosperous, knowledgeable overclass dominating a huge, illiterate underclass? Tyrants have burned books but they could not burn all the copies. The tyranny of the electronic elite would be far more efficient.

*I will use technology to support and increase free access to knowledge, not to deny it to the world's have-nots.*

## Fifth New Law

### Honor the past and create the future

*Time present and time past  
Are both perhaps present in time future  
And time future contained in time past.*

—T.S. Eliot, *Burnt Norton*

Two characters emerge in the current discussion on the future of libraries: nostalgists who loathe electronic technology and anything more modern than the printing press, and technophiles who scorn all the past—including last year's computer. Surely there must be a few benighted souls who fit in each category, but rational discourse is about balance and the rate of possible change. Rational people discuss the balance in present and future libraries among print, video, or sound recordings on the one hand, and electronic texts, images, and databases on the other. Rational people recognize that each medium of communication has its strengths, weaknesses, and role to play. Rational people look at the reality of library use, library collections, and library services and project from that. Extremists dream a future and make assertions that have no basis in reality or common sense. Old things are not valuable because they are old, but valuable old things must continue. New things are neither good nor bad because they are new, but must be evaluated on their costs and usefulness. Wise people will understand the past of libraries, know why they are what they are today, and build a future based on tradition and innovation.

*I will give library users what they want—balance between the old and the new.* □