Kyra Zirlin
Professor Bill Crowley, Ph.D.
LIS 701 01
6/24/24

Libraries and Security: How Libraries Became Trusted Places of Privacy

The stereotypical librarian is often quite unflattering—owlish people with brown sweaters, pursed lips, and strange obsessions. Considered quiet, angry, and possessive over their materials, there is only one collection of stereotypes that is flattering: intelligent, diligent, and very trustworthy. Breaking away from the negatives and leaning into the positives, how did these collective cultural characteristics come to be? Specifically, how did librarians and consequently libraries become institutions known for privacy, trust, and confidentiality? A 2016 research study done by the Pew Research Institute, as dissected in her article *In Libraries We Trust* by Laurie Putnam, showcased that "...78% of adults—about 8 out of 10 of your friends, neighbors, and colleagues—say that public libraries help them find information that is trustworthy and reliable. So say a whopping 87% of Millennials, ages 18 to 35…". This data marked librarians as the most trusted professionals in the United States. Moreover, these statistics show a phenomenon that can be traced back a millenia: the inherent trust patrons feel towards their librarians. In fact, let's venture back in history to take a look at ancient librarians and where they stood in the cultural makeup of society.

The first librarians were religious figures in ancient Babylonia, puttering around in the 3rd millennium B.C., tucking away precious carved tablets and scrolls for future reference. They were considered highly intelligent, influential, and important, as those who worked inside the temples were seen as intermediaries between the people and their gods. Pretty high starting point, eh? According to Michael Kozuh in his article, *Temple, Economy, and Religion in First Millennium Babylonia,* "The elite families of the temple's city staffed the uppermost levels of the hierarchy, giving them control over the temple's wealth but at the same time keeping the temples integrated into the broader social networks of the community" (5). Meaning, as the elite children were a part of one of the few levels of society in which they could read and write, the "librarians" (though they were not called librarians at the time) were the influential figures of their societies. The fact that these influential figures took up post as the first librarian plays a substantial role in the deeply engraved trust we will be exploring.

If we fast forward to around the 3–7 centuries, we will land in the time of the ancient Greeks, Romans, and Assyrians—all of whom made colossal contributions to library society. The Greeks and Egyptians helped build the Library of Alexandria, the Assyrian Royal family formed the Library of Ashurbanipal, and Julius Caesar is credited with starting some of the first real "public libraries" (Cartwright) in not only Rome, but the world. All of these ancient libraries

were home to vast and important collections, which had to be collected, sustained, and organized by trusted and well-regarded scholars. Let's take a look at one librarian who, amongst his many peers over the millenia, helped ingrain trust into the masses.

Zenodotus of Ephesus is renowned as the first librarian of the Library of Alexandria. Not only a librarian, he was also a Greek grammarian, and is acclaimed for "writing editions of Greek poets and especially for producing the first critical edition of Homer" (Britannica). Intelligent, very well-educated, influential, and trusted amongst the Greek people as an educator, he was also known to be strict, studious, and diligent. He was, however, regarded highly by the public, the politicians, and the wealthy. So much so that remnants of his personality and his loves (books) have survived in our modern-day literature to help form the image many people think of when they think of a librarian.

What do ancient beliefs surrounding librarians have to do with how librarians are trusted today? As it turns out, many ancient modes of social hierarchy still hold influence in today's world. Since the human species first evolved into familial units, we have relied on one another for survival, guidance, and even progress. This occurrence has left markers in our behaviors that have us put immense trust into those we deem "experts." These experts help guide us, and most importantly, help us progress—a very large need in our evolutionary world. These figures act as our parents, doctors, presidents (sometimes), soldiers, friends, and librarians (Chng et al.). Of course, context matters—we look towards perceived competence depending on the situation. For the dissemination and procurement of trustworthy knowledge, society looks towards librarians. Simply put, just as ancient librarians were trusted and considered the "experts" of the vast information they helped sustain, modern-day librarians are seen in the same way—just less societal hierarchies.

Moreover, as mentioned above, the image or idea of librarians as intelligent, bookish, and trustworthy figures has stemmed down from librarians like Zenodotus. Stereotypes can last centuries, and all it takes is one repeated behavior for those stereotypes to form: "Stereotypes are not mysterious or arbitrary; they are grounded in the observations of everyday life," said Alice Eagly, the James Padilla Chair in Arts and Sciences and professor of psychology at Northwestern University. This collective stereotype has spanned down centuries to help sustain a long-labored trust between patrons and librarians. Zenodotus stood as a valuable figure for royalty, politicians, and the wealthy to inquire about any question, and that reverence passed into the public and has survived to this day.

Now, how do we see this ancient trust, as emboldened by stereotypes, played out in our modern world? Let's take a look at our media and some of our more famous librarian characters to see how they are portrayed. Our first figure, Rupert Giles, from *Buffy The Vampire Slayer,* is a temperamental individual. He is rough, a bit mean, and very confident. However, this is who he is as a person. As a librarian, he is dependable, intelligent, and trustworthy. In fact, he is the main

character's rock throughout the series—she trusts almost no one as much as she trusts her librarian. Our next example is Twilight Sparkle from *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic.* A true pony librarian at heart, she starts off with no friends and a bit of an antisocial personality; however, she is regarded as intelligent, diligent, ambitious, and incredibly *trustworthy*. In fact, she is so trustworthy that the Queen herself sends Twilight Sparkle off to go on secret missions with her friends! Finally, let's take a look at Marion the librarian from *The Music Man*. Stuffy? Yes. Stern and kind of scary? Sure. Strong and trusted by the community to defend books and choose literature that will broaden the minds of her patrons? Most definitely. She is all of the bad stereotypes of librarians rolled up in what also makes them trustworthy in the eyes of our culture. The core of these characteristics—educated, intelligent, tough, diligent, and *trustworthy*—can be seen going back millennia, from Zenodotus to a magical purple pony.

However, it is not enough to only have the legacy of this trust. We must sustain it so that future generations of libraries and librarians can benefit from this deeply-engraved faith. A very large way in which this faith is sustained is the standardization and application of the American Library Association's Code of Ethics. Interestingly enough, the ALA's Code of Ethics was not created until 1939 and has had four revisions since then: 1981, 1995, 2008, and 2021 (ALA). It may be worth noting that each revision was done during major historical events. 1939 was the start of World War II, in 1981 IBM launched its first PC that used Microsoft Software MS DOS, 1995 was declared the Year for Tolerance by the United Nations, in 2008 Barack Obama was elected as the 44th president, and in 2021 we were in the midst of battling a global pandemic. While there is no definitive meaning behind the coincidence of the revisions and historical events, in each new revision of the American Library Association's Code of Ethics, we see additional codes that enable modern-day librarians to embolden community trust. For example, some core tenets of the Code of Ethics are as follows, taken directly from the American Library Association's website:

- We protect each library user's right to privacy and confidentiality with respect to information sought or received and resources consulted, borrowed, acquired or transmitted.
- We distinguish between our personal convictions and professional duties and do not allow our personal beliefs to interfere with fair representation of the aims of our institutions or the provision of access to their information resources.
- We affirm the inherent dignity and rights of every person.

Of course, these tenants mean nothing if librarians do not follow them. According to data collected by the American Library Association, there are 57 independent library associations that act as branches of the organization and follow the written codes (ALA). This showcases the

Associations influence and how far their impact reaches into the library community. It is in this way that the code has become so standardized—taught in schools and preached by library management. Moreover, as this standardization pairs with the "ingrained" trust passed down by our ancestors, it acts as a buoy to keep that trust alive. Actions are stronger than words, as the saying goes.

When a librarian refuses to hand over the history of a patron's library card without proper identification and pin, we are cementing the first pillar. When we only leave messages on a patron's phone if they tell us it is safe to do so, we are affirming the first pillar. When we refuse to give a patron's history to law enforcement unless they come with a search warrant we are, once again, letting the public know that we take the first pillar incredibly seriously. Moreover, when a librarian, such as Marion of the *Music Man*, leaves their own political, religious, or ethical beliefs out of the library in order to provide all materials to their patrons, we are acting upon the second pillar. When we fight book bans with the knowledge that "burying your head in the sand" against literature you do not believe in is immensely damaging, we are fighting for our communities using the second tenant. And just as with the first two, when we work to assist the displaced patrons in the library just as hard as we work to help the more fortunate patrons—we are performing the duties of the third tenant. The actual performance of these codes is why libraries are heralded as safe third spaces, warming centers, cooling centers, and judgment-free places for the displaced to rest and lessen the constant anxiety.

Moreover, I have had patrons tell me that their doctors, bankers, teachers, lawyers, and other trustworthy figures tell them to come to the library, as the librarians will help them find what they need. It is both heartening and disheartening to hear that, depending on whether I am able to help them. But it is through the actions that the American Library Association's Code of Ethics encourages in librarians all over the United States that we are able to sustain the sense of trust, security, and confidentiality that libraries are known for and our ancestors heralded. Without it, patrons would not feel comfortable coming up to the desk and asking us to help them put together a list of food banks, financial aid institutions, or charities as they share with a kind ear the struggles they are going through.

There is a new sort of trust emerging into the world, however, that the ancient librarians could never have imagined—cyber security. And with general cyber-security, you have the question of security for e-government as well. E-government, as defined by the Encyclopedia of Computer Science and Technology, at its core works to "... expand agencies' presence on the Web to make government sites more useful. This can include providing summaries of regulations or other complicated information, offering online assistance, allowing filing of tax or other forms electronically, and helping with applications such as for Social Security, the Affordable Care Act, or Medicare." Moreover, as Paul T. Jaeger and Kenneth R. Fleischmann explain in their article, *Public libraries, values, trust, and e-government,* "The unique values embraced by public libraries have not only shaped the missions of libraries; they have influenced popular opinion

surrounding public libraries and fostered the confidence that communities place in them as a source of trusted information and assistance in finding information. As public libraries have embraced the provision of Internet access, these values and trust have become intertwined with their new social role as a public access point for e-government both in normal information activities and in the most extreme circumstances."

In fact, more and more government applications, materials, and other vital operations are being encouraged by local governments to be completed online. As one of the only free spaces in which the public can use computers, or copiers and printers very cheaply, this means that more and more patrons are coming to libraries to complete e-government work.

For example, using my own personal experiences working in the Adult Services department of a public library, we are incredibly busy during tax season. We cannot, of course, give advice or help patrons fill out taxes, but we set up an entire printing station just for printing tax forms (for free), as well as having a table of already printed, common tax forms for patrons to utilize. This is just one way in which libraries are helping support e-government, and patrons are trusting libraries to provide them with the correct information. Moreover, the number of passports and social security cards that I am simply handed when asked to help make copies is a tad shocking. No holds barred; they trust that I am an upstanding, kind person that will help them complete their work without privacy breaches or judgment—all because I work in a library. However, this tells the tale of person-to-person trust, not necessarily computer security.

As the use of library computers to complete other vital and sensitive activities that have been moved to the more accessible web, such as banking, applying for loans, and making insurance adjustments, begins to rise---libraries have had to up their cyber security in order to sustina patron trust that library computers can be used for sensitive jobs such as e-government use. Particularly, as explained in the article *New Trends in Library Security* by Steve Albrecht for the American Libraries Magazine, "Your IT department should be backing up mission-critical modules nightly, as well as internet and intranet systems, so any cyberattack will not paralyze your facility…Enforce your library's internet use policy when it comes to patrons who want to use thumb drives on your systems, and report all suspicions of internal or external hacking to your IT department." These are only some examples of precautions taken by public libraries to make sure their patrons are secure when using the library's computers. Some other examples include the need for either a library card or a guest pass to log into the computer, "time-out" configurations where the computer will turn off if a patron steps away for more than 15 minutes, and data-wiping software that will wipe the computer of all usage data after the patron has logged off. A large one that many patrons appreciate as well is the rejection of monitoring software—even IT cannot access your computer screen when you are using it (Indian Trails Public Library). These are common public library computer security practices. These efforts truly make a difference in how the public views computer security. I get asked quite frequently whether patron information gets saved after they've logged off, and I am always very happy to

tell them that the computer gets wiped. Finally, these assurances make it so patrons continue to come to libraries to perform e-government, and helps sustain that overarching trustworthiness libraries hold.

This credibility, as encouraged, performed, and continued by librarians all over the United States and all throughout time, is vital to the success of libraries. Without it, libraries would fail in their core function—to help their patrons. The combination of faith through legacies such as Zenodotus, the standardization of the American Library Association's Code of Ethics, and the multitude of precautions put in place for the security of internet use and e-government truly only scratches at the surface of the trust surrounding libraries and librarians. It is a lovely thing to be trusted so much while knowing you can live up to those expectations. Hopefully we will one day be like Zenodotus, who fostered such trust in patrons that it lasted millenia.

Works Cited

Albrecht, Steve. "American Libraries Magazine." American Libraries Magazine, 22 May 2018, americanlibrariesmagazine.org/2017/06/01/new-trends-library-security/.

American Library Association. "Professional Ethics." American Library Association, American Library Association, 29 June 2021, www.ala.org/tools/ethics.

Cartwright, Mark. "Libraries in the Ancient World." World History Encyclopedia, 23 July 2019, www.worldhistory.org/article/1428/libraries-in-the-ancient-world/.

Chng, Daniel Han Ming, et al. "Why People Believe in Their Leaders — or Not." MIT Sloan Management Review, Aug. 2018, sloanreview.mit.edu/article/why-people-believe-in-their-leaders-or-not/#:~:text=Based%20on%20input%20from%20employees.

Eagly, Alice. "How Do Stereotypes Form and Can They Be Altered?: Institute for Policy Research - Northwestern University." Northwestern.edu, 25 Aug. 2015, www.ipr.northwestern.edu/news/2015/eagly-stereotypes-social-role-theory.html.

"Indian Trails Public Library District." Indian Trails Public Library District, 31 Jan. 2024, www.indiantrailslibrary.org/.

Kozuh, Michael. "Temple, Economy, and Religion in First Millennium Babylonia." Www.academia.edu, www.academia.edu/251208/Temple_Economy_and_Religion_in_First_Millennium_Babylonia.

Putnam, Laurie. "In Libraries We Trust | next Libraries." Next Libraries, 15 Mar. 2018, www.nextlibraries.org/2018/03/in-libraries-we-trust/#:~:text=According%20to%20a%202016%20study.

Swicker, Ashlie. "The 10 Best Librarian Characters in TV and Film." BOOK RIOT, 29 Aug. 2023, bookriot.com/best-librarian-characters-in-tv-and-film/.

"Zenodotus of Ephesus | Greek Scholar." Encyclopedia Britannica, www.britannica.com/biography/Zenodotus-of-Ephesus.