Ranganathan’s Laws:

Applications in Today’s Digital Age

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When Ranganathan wrote his Five Laws of Librarianship, he did so with passion and eloquence comparable to a religious text. While perhaps he could not foresee the technological advancements that would take place in the decades to come, Ranganathan most certainly carved out a standard set of ideals that librarians of the future could gather around. Today, his Five Laws have become so universal that they have invaded library discussions of all kinds, present even subtly because of their pervasiveness. Because of their overall importance, librarians must take Ranganathan’s laws into consideration when going about their services in libraries and other information professions; likewise, library science students should anticipate the roles that the ideals behind Ranganathan’s laws will play in their future careers.

Briefly summed up by Finks’ article (2010), Ranganathan’s Five Laws of Librarianship were meant to demonstrate concisely the morals behind librarianship. His first law, “books are for use,” refers to the accessibility of books. The second, “every person his or her book,” is a call to avoid discrimination against readers. Then Ranganathan argues against complicated organization systems in his third law, “every book its reader”; since every book deserves to be read, we must make books easier to find. He emphasizes this in his fourth law, “save time for the reader,” in which Ranganathan urges efficiency for the public, even if this means more work for the librarian. Then finally, in Ranganathan’s fifth law, “a library is a growing organism,” we hear a need to make sure the library has room to grow, and the support as it does so. All of these laws are important to librarianship, coming paragraphs, I will discuss in detail the significance of these laws.
Ranganathan’s laws have value in libraries today. In class, we’ve discussed some of the barriers that librarians face in meeting user needs, and in my particular discussion group, our surveys at the beginning of class revealed that one of these barriers is getting users to the library and teaching them to utilize its services (Informal Library Use Survey 2014). However, if libraries were not efficient, had no room for growth, were complicated bureaucracies, discriminated against readers, and had large quantities of books that were either inaccessible or difficult to access, then libraries’ current patrons would decrease dramatically. Ranganathan’s first, second, third, and fourth laws are important because they refer to customer service and providing the patron with the best possible library experience; his fifth law deals more with the future, and providing libraries with the resources to expand and anticipate changes and prospective user needs—an idea that is equally important. If one reads through the ALA’s website, especially its mission and priorities and its Library Bill of Rights, these two pages by themselves encompass many of Ranganathan’s laws. For example, the Library Bill of Rights covers discrimination and accessibility of library materials, while the ALA’s missions and priorities are listed as “Diversity, Equity of Access, Education and Continuous Learning, Intellectual Freedom, and 21st Century Literacy” (ALA.org). Based upon my own interpretations of the ALA’s values, much of Ranganathan’s ideas are in-built within the organization, and those that are not seem to be topics of discussion for many libraries, such as the need for more space for collection growth. Depending on the library, problems still persist with implementing all of Ranganathan’s laws; if librarians are aware of them, though, there is room to improve upon current library practices.
Comparing Ranganathan’s views to those of Gorman, it seems to me that Gorman’s views discuss the same moral fabric, but worded in a different manner. For example, instead of talking explicitly about saving time for patrons, Gorman refers to the fact that libraries serve humanity and should always strive to serve them better (784). In addition, Gorman discusses “using technology intelligently to enhance service” (785), which, if we view it through the lens of Ranganathan’s laws, can just as easily refer to the accessibility of materials such as online resources, simplifying library practices, and saving time and energy for the library patron. Overall, it seems as though Gorman is stating the same ethical practices as Ranganathan in a way that reflects the environment of the modern library.

However, we must ask ourselves: were Gorman’s revisions really necessary? Ranganathan’s laws, originally written in the year 1931, were not meant to predict the evolution of technology; rather, they were meant to make accessible the ethics that librarians strive to uphold. If one understands that “book” can just as easily mean “eBook,” or “electronic journal,” or even the general “source,” then Ranganathan’s laws still encompass the ideals of this digital age. According to Rubin, the digital environment creates a situation in which “librarians function more like an information broker than an intermediary who simply places a library user in contact with a resource” (251); in my own words, technology has changed the manners in which we obtain our information and librarians’ levels of involvement, but the moral fabric of librarianship seems to be the same as in Ranganathan’s time. I feel that his laws encompass technology without their wording being altered:
1) **Books are for use.** This encompasses books, eBooks, electronic sources, newspapers, periodicals, webpages, databases, and more. In other words, information is for use.

2) **Every person his or her book.** Since each patron has different information wants and needs, and it is a librarian’s job to see that he or she has free access to all forms of information, as well as conference rooms, Internet, computers, and other resources, regardless of his or her background.

3) **Every book its reader.** Since every book, whether print or electronic, has intrinsic value, this means that no book should go unread or censored. Librarians must think critically about both placement of materials AND about efficiency of databases; our job is to make all information more user-friendly.

4) **Save time for the reader.** Linked with the statement above, librarians must make information more user-friendly, the primary reason being that the patron’s time is valuable. Databases that run more efficiently, faster Internet connections, use less time and make information more accessible for patrons.

5) **A library is a growing organism.** Libraries need room to grow so that they can anticipate user needs; in today’s digital age, this means offering more computers, better-quality Internet connection, and access to outlets for laptop users (Rubin 248).

None of Ranganathan’s words above have been changed; yet today their interpretations encompass more than traditional books. Why does this work? Because the ideals that underpin Ranganathan’s laws are still valid; it’s only the medium that has changed.
As I mentioned earlier, librarians and library students alike must be aware of library issues and the ethics behind them; it is only through this knowledge that systems can be maintained and improved. As a library student, I can work to recognize Ranganathan’s laws at work and implement this knowledge in my career. In class last week, Katelyn Yoxtheimer and Meera Garud spoke about the importance of leadership in young adult librarianship (Leadership Education for Young Adult Librarians); I feel that leadership is a valuable trait in all forms of librarianship, and when it comes to Ranganathan’s laws, implementing leadership and opening discussions is an effective way of problem-solving. For example, the Berninghausen Debate brings up valid points about problems surrounding censorship of materials, which relates to Ranganathan’s ideas of accessibility of books and the ease with which we find them; the information professionals who responded to his article also made a point that discrimination is a library issue, an idea similar to (Berninghausen et al.). In my future career, knowledge of different sides of issues such as these, coupled with leadership training and critical thinking, can help me to effectively collaborate with other librarians and evaluate the ways in which the library is run and if the policies in place make information more user-friendly or not. A keen eye will also aid me in recognizing problems: are certain similar books shelved in different places? Do we need more seating or electric outlets in study areas? Can paperwork be processed more efficiently? With Ranganathan’s ideas in mind and with leadership skills giving me the ability to communicate my ideas, it’s my hope that I’ll be able to improve the library in which I’ll someday work.

Overall, Ranganathan’s laws are pervasive and still hold validity in today’s modern libraries. Though technology has changed the formats and methods that librarians
utilize, the ethics of librarianship—specifically user-friendliness and respect for all patrons’ needs as well as their time—still support the actions required for the success of libraries. While Gorman offered up a thorough reinterpretation of Ranganathan’s laws, the original laws still carry weight because of the basic principles upon which they’re built. Knowing this, librarians and future librarians such as myself have a foundation upon which to think critically about library issues and user needs.
Works Cited


