Abstract

Social organizations, institutions, governments, and bureaucracies are all manifestations of power distribution. Many contemporary theories on power are at least partly informed by notions that were introduced in General Systems Theory. Public libraries are open systems. In an average organization, a hierarchy divides tasks, sets rules, and defines levels of information access. Considerations about strategy and strategic motives can be assessed from a variety of conflicting viewpoints. One major theoretical bifurcation that can be made in regards to power is the “Power to” which is facilitative and the “Power over” which is prohibitive. Providing information that is free and readily accessible is an important contributing factor in the obtainment of personal and professional goals. A wide spectrum exists between the polar tactics of making all information available and tightly managing the release of information. Although profit is not one of the goals of the library, the pursuit of organizational excellence and the addition of value to the community that it serves is.

Keywords: power, libraries, information, theory, strategy

Introduction

Perhaps more than at other times, election years focus our attention on power. Power is a difficult subject to define, due to the nature of its ubiquity and volatility. There has been an enormous amount of literature devoted to the topic and a significant amount of controversy. In practical applications power is inseparable from human interactions and relationships. Social organizations, institutions, governments, and bureaucracies are all manifestations of power distribution. This article will only touch upon a few broad ways of how to conceptualize power. Special attention will be paid to the role of power as it applies to libraries and information organizations.

Power Relations And The Information Context

Many contemporary theories on power are at least partly informed by notions that were introduced in General Systems Theory. General Systems was an integrative movement that combined an analysis of organizational structure and systems technology. At the simplest level, it can be understood as an attempt to “find common features in terms of shared aspects of organization.” (Laszlo, 1972) The founder of the movement is generally considered to be Ludwig von Bertlanffy, whom had defined a “system” to be “a set of elements standing in interrelation among themselves and with the environment.” (Stueart & Moran, 2002) Defining the boundaries of systems can be complicated. For
example, in the case of a library or information center, determinations have to be made as to who the stakeholders are. These can include patrons, staff, administrators, donors, and political funding sources. The interplay of various elements, as a program is defined or a consensus is sought, indicates that a system is “open”. Open systems interact with their environments in terms of an input/output process. Another way of saying this is that activities and programs lead to outcomes. This is a relevant notion to the information profession, because a static or closed system does not seem to be an option for public libraries and client oriented information activities. From a management perspective, the open system in which library staff assist individual patrons can be regarded in terms of the expectations, hopes, and goals that these patrons share. In principle, one should be able to successfully search for repeating patterns of these elements, and evaluate which patterns are beneficial and which ones are harmful to the success of the information environment and those who use it.

Although systems theory was first developed in regards to ecological organisms, the focus on structure led the theory to considerations of any form of organization, including societal organizations. Systems theory used general attributes to explain phenomena. Power was usually conceptualized as manifesting in the use of hierarchies among biological systems. This theoretical approach can be extended to hierarchies in social organizations. In an average organization, a hierarchy divides tasks, sets rules, and defines levels of information access. Hierarchies have other useful functions. They can be used to settle disputes and resolve issues. They have an easily identifiable command chain and are familiar to most everyone. However, they are slow adapters during change events or crises, because a lot of energy goes into preserving the status of those who are at the top (which is an anti-learning strategy). Hierarchies are also primarily a “power over” scheme, that is, power over people and resources. Those in the dominant positions of a hierarchy can make decisions which negatively effect the life chances of the subordinate members, such as classifying them as expendable or auxiliary.

Hierarchies make the distinction between the concepts of power and authority especially clear. Authority is the legitimate right to do things or command people due to the status of the position itself. (Stueart & Moran, 2002) Although it would be ideal to have organizational members accept the authority of both a position and the person who occupies it, valid authority is only concerned with the former term. By contrast, power can be conceived as the ability to influence others, and it is not circumscribed or guaranteed by a formal organizational position. There are other types of power (understood both negatively and positively) besides legitimate or formal ones, such as coercive power or the power one acquires by becoming a self-taught authority at something.

Considerations about strategy and strategic motives can be assessed from a variety of conflicting viewpoints. It is a common observation that CEO’s and business leaders “seek to gain information about labor, commodity, and capital markets, and then take strategic advantage of them.” (McNeil, 1978) The incompatibility between the differing interests of business leaders, consumers, students, managers, employees, and so forth can appear like a struggle in which democratic forms of deliberation are sometimes required to settle a conflict or to allocate resources. The notion of equality is a good if ironic example of a concept developed through a slow and contested social construction involving power struggles. What becomes accepted as fair rules or what constitutes a
“level playing field” is a result of political debates and arguments. One major theoretical bifurcation that can be made in regards to power is the “Power to” which is facilitative and the “Power over” which is prohibitive. One can perhaps immediately sense the ambiguity when it is considered that a person’s “power to” may involve asserting power over many others. Therefore the effects of power as productive or negative are contingent on the situation of the agents in the relation: good for some, bad for others. Power exists in this view as a capacity to extend the freedom of some to achieve something and the ability to curtail the power of some to achieve something. It is easy to see how libraries perform the “power to” function for a given patron base. Providing information that is free and readily accessible is an important contributing factor in the obtainment of personal and professional goals. What is not often understood however is that the provision of these materials entails the “power over” function towards those who would profit by charging a fee or requiring some other service for the relevant information sources. This is made possible by public funding allocated to the library by a political institution.

Activities that are closely tied to these concepts are the various ways of controlling information. A wide spectrum exists between the polar tactics of making all information available and tightly managing the release of information. In conflicted organizations managers will have to adopt a mixed strategy. Some information may have to be withheld from some participants, because there might not be a clearly definable “best” strategy. (Klir, 1972) Such a scenario could be the result of a lack of funding, downsizing, political change, and so on. Another area for investigation is the notion of rational choice itself. What may be rational for an individual pursuing his own goals in a competitive environment may not be rational for a collective unit pursuing advancement. A collective rationality may have the potential for a conflict of interest within its members while working toward larger goals. And if these goals are achieved, there will be questions of how to apportion the rewards to the different members, and what the criterion will be in determining authority.

In the library profession there is always a strong political component as to how libraries are evaluated, because nothing can be done without revenue and public libraries are tax funded. As mentioned previously, the important point in this context is that a public access library proscribes the activity of those who would limit access to public information or charge a fee for it. The method of this control is by making the information free and accessible. This is the primary reason that libraries always have and always will operate primarily in a network of external relations, where library funding is coordinated by boards and committees allocating tax money. In most cases the income generated by overdue materials and other miscellaneous fees would not even cover the utility bills. Most publicly funded libraries do not sell books, charge membership fees, bill for internet services, or charge for journal access. They are therefore completely dependent upon the citizenry to vote for politicians that support the information mission. This is also the reason that most libraries have a “who” restriction on who can borrow books or access data bases, usually the tax base (local residents) for a public library or students who have paid tuition or other fees for an academic one. Although profit is not one of the goals of the library, the pursuit of organizational excellence and the addition of value to the community that it serves is.
The use of controlling techniques is a power activity. Similar to the other definitions, a control can be defined as an action or process that leads to a change of results, or outcomes. (Stueart & Moran, 2002) Controlling techniques can be used as devices to insure that goals and plans are met in a timely manner. They include establishing standards, measuring performance, and correcting deviations. Where appropriate, quantitative standards should be developed and implemented, because these are more likely to have a recognizably objective component than qualitative ones. Quantitative standards also make it easier to keep accurate records. These records should contain reports on user satisfaction, public services and facilities, and technical services. In regards to libraries and information centers, controls can also be understood in terms of the available resources, whether they be physical, digital, or human.

Thomas Hobbes was one of the earlier influential theorists on power. In his popular work *Leviathan* (1651) he had considered power as equivalent to cause in a kind of rigid push and shove imagery. If an individual can make something happen, something jump which was previously at rest, he had power. In this catapult and pendulum imagery everything is mechanically deterministic. Moreover, an absolute sovereign is required to keep all of the moving parts in this huge machine from falling into discord and fighting with each other. If however, as is done in current times, the social reality of subjects rather than positioned objects is considered, then what is important is not so much the smack of sword on helmet as the strategy of what is going on behind the sword. This leads into game theory and decision theory. The ways in which managers reach decisions in order to improve systems and solve problems has been a main interest of these complementary theories. (Osborne, 2009)

Decision theory for managers often revolves around conflict resolution strategies that borrow heavily from game models. (Rapaport, 1974) These are dynamic models (chess moves, for example) that progress from situation to situation. The use of mathematical models, computer technology, and linear programming have all been utilized to explore how decisions should be made. (Stueart & Moran, 2002) As has been emphasized, a central concept for the manager is that of strategy. Strategy can be conceived of as a plan or blueprint for what (ideally rational) individuals will do in any given possible situation. Managers will usually only have a limited and specific number of personnel and therefore a limited number of moves they can make, and these moves will be limited primarily by budgeting concerns. Because a library or information center manager will be operating within the parameters of an open system, changes in the surrounding environment may either alter or negate prior decisions. Flexibility during the course of change is a necessary strategic ability.

Flexibility of power management shows itself in how resources are utilized by agents in order to do things. Many different (and sometimes conflicting) entities can possess the resources that enable the exercise of power. Organizations, groups, and individuals can all provide different examples. Power can be expressed by means or instruments, such as money, technology, education, etc. Although these could be considered as causal relations, their predictable character is far from obvious. Consider the case of IT specialists, for example. Information technology specialists may have no formal role in the institution where they perform services, but without them the technology would not be available to patrons, and researchers would likely not find what they are searching for. If IT specialists are to count as power resources in a library or
information center where they have no formal position or role, it becomes clear that what is most relevant is context.

Some have addressed the difficulty by claiming that to have power does not necessarily mean to do something, but to have the ability to do something. This shifts the view of power as a property of relations to a capacity of agents. It becomes a possibility, so that an “if …then” propositional analysis could be used. (Blais, 1974) If this situation occurs, then these effects will follow. The explanatory value of this conception is somewhat thin. For one, it shifts the emphasis away from social relations and treats power as an individual possession. Something has or obtains power rather than being in a relationship of power. Power is then simply an effect observable in cases of action. Otherwise power is at rest (as potentiality) and in rest there is nothing to consider. Furthermore, such a view seems to suggest that resistance to a power act is somehow deviant or reactionary. To take a different view, the recognition that social reality is a construct of society and so appears differently to people who have different interests in its arrangement, negotiation, and character gives resistance a normative or shaping role. In management literature the focus is generally on the use of power in conflict situations where individuals or groups are attempting to salvage their vested interests against authority. There is an alternative line of thought on beneficial conflict, which emphasizes power balance and open argument as a way to avoid the win/lose dichotomy. (Folger, Poole, & Stutman, 1997) Moderate conflict can bring positive change and innovation. Here “positive” means collaborative, or cooperative.

Power Theories And Information Behavior

Some theorists hold that power is primarily a relational effect. This is an alternative to the view that power is a property that can be held by someone or something. Power is not merely a thing that can be wrested from another or held onto. Experienced as a relation, we accept it because it informs all of those relations in which we are involved. Power in this view can only be understood by one’s relations to others (Anderson, John, & Keltner, 2012) To deny or reject the relations that we experience every day would involve a loss of stability. Others have identified power as any force that provokes a behavior which would not have occurred in its absence. (Emerson, 1962) These theorists tend to tie power closely to dependence, with the power residing in whatever is the source on which the dependent depend. As mentioned previously, in an organization managers foster this dependence by controlling access. The access in question could be to information, persons, or financial instruments.

Power can be said to be similar to money in that it can be viewed as a circulating medium. (Parson, 1967) Just as one cannot have what one wants without money, so too one cannot have legitimacy and order without power. One may not agree to consent, just as one may refuse to pay for something, but one does so with an idea of the consequences which the authorities will bring to bear. Resistance to power in these circumstances can actually reinforce it organizationally, because the resistance brings forth the appropriate sanctions/activities. A police force in a place where crime was absent would soon face budget cuts. In this dynamic libraries act as a normative influence because they make resources available, in contrast to those organizations that have only a punitive role, existing mainly to punish or forbid the unlawful acquisition of resources. Moreover, a market economy needs widespread confidence in this type of stability in order to expand.
In a similar fashion, power resources must be viewed with confidence by citizens. The belief that resources are being used in a predictable and appropriate manner is essential for overall prosperity.

Anthony Giddens (1990) argues that we are in a time when the power of states are declining relative to global organizations operating in global markets. Action at a distance by organizations has been made possible by the storage of resources in digital databases and software that can both enable and limit social interactions, rather than through military extension and hardware. Elsewhere he agrees with the influential linguistic philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein that human rationality is always context dependent. For that reason power is inescapable because all social constructs involve relations of power, wherein the participants are drawing resources from the societal structures themselves in a rule governed way.

Closely associated with these ideas is that of role theory. Role theory claims that a person’s behavior in an organization is dependent on the positions they occupy. (Sluss, Dick, & Thompson, 2011) Since one’s role is one’s social identity, it is possible to understand the expectations that others in the organization have for a person. Although the concept of a role is derived from the stage (and these roles are by definition fictional) the concept is useful because of the way that it groups behaviors under general titles. Some have questioned just how real of an entity a role is, while others have puzzled over the degree of role consensus in regards to gauging the expectations of others. Erving Goffman (1976) has claimed that more work is needed on role commitment, which he finds to be a critical component in the type of power that is exercised in an organization.

Stewart Clegg (1979) emphasized that organizations are rich in discourse. A large part of managerial work involves the interpretation of key texts and the rationalization of different accounts of what the texts are saying. Narratives and stories guide the lives of those who work in organizations, and they help to constitute identities. In that regard power is often associated with the prestige of the position. The prestige of a position also seems to be associated with how much information the occupier of the position can legitimately access. It is interesting to note in this context the ever present harping on levels of prestige and “excellence” among academic libraries and the Universities of which they are a part. In this regard the perception of an institution or position can determine how much power it acquires.

Since important data is routinely stored in and provided by automated or online information systems, one can readily understand that technical specialization has made the expert or highly trained person important. As mentioned previously, many library administrators are dependent on IT support for computer system work and other technical services. This gives these auxiliary specialists a relatively large amount of power, because of the extent to which a functioning library depends upon their knowledge.

Conclusion

In conclusion something should be said about how power has a musical component. Musical instruments are there for us to play. The exercise of power over them in order to make music requires discipline. It also requires talent and practice. The simple possession of an instrument, irrespective of whether it is expensive or second hand, is not enough. An instrument by itself cannot produce a melody. When one considers a symphony, the combinatorial possibilities which that requires, one senses the
extent to which power is a cooperative effort. This can be compared to the provisioning of library and information resources for patrons seeking to improve their circumstances, a relationship envisioned here as a performance between an ensemble and an audience. Machiavelli, that great theorist of power, provides the lesson: ‘And it ought to be remembered that there is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things.’ (Machiavelli, 1532) A new order of things: the library now re-envisioned as a community center of learning and advancement, an institution that empowers. As we have seen elsewhere, power need not be considered as a negative force of coercion or as essentially prohibitive in nature. Power is a skill.

References

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