Book Review

The system of professions

Colin Furness[a,b,c]
[a]Faculty of Information, University of Toronto, Toronto, ON, Canada
[b]Dalla Lana School of Public Health, University of Toronto, Toronto, ON, Canada
[c]Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, Toronto, ON, Canada
Tel.: +1 416 978 4770; E-mail: colin.furness@utoronto.ca

Abbott's seminal (1988) work in sociology, "The System of Professions", has new relevance to the information professions in the 21st century. His model portrays professions locked in competition for jurisdiction over solvable problems, and librarianship figures prominently as a case exploration.

Abbott, A. (1988). The System of Professions: An Essay on the Division of Expert Labor. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 435 pages. ISBN: 0-226-00069-9

What is an 'information professional'? For that matter, what is a 'professional'? These questions are awkward because they are difficult to answer with precision or certainty. 'The professions' have been an object of study by sociologists for many decades, but only one author has meaningfully ventured into the information professions. *The System of Professions* is now somewhat elderly, but the foundational theory developed here is very well-suited to a field like Information – weakly delineated and continually evolving. The purpose of this review is to explore whether this classic sociological work, following its thirtieth birthday, might have new relevance to students and practitioners of both traditional and emerging information professions, given their rapidly changing work environments.

Andrew Abbott is a professor of Sociology at the University of Chicago, and he served as the long-time editor of the American Journal of Sociology (2000–2016). This was his first book, notably winning the prestigious American Sociology Association's Distinguished Scholarly Book Award (1991). Abbott's own doctoral research had focused on the emergence of psychiatry as a profession; it was from this work that he abstracted his general conceptual model of professions as a 'survival-of-the-fittest' ecology, and one that is set in a frequently changing social, epistemological, and technical landscape.

Abbott's distinctive contribution to the discourse is to methodically define professions wholly in terms of an elbows-out application of expertise; professions compete with each other for expertise-based jurisdiction over solvable problems. Competition

can arise when social or technical changes act to weaken an existing profession's jurisdiction, or to create an entirely new niche, as with the proliferation of computers. The outcomes of competition may be that one profession seizes turf from another (as with psychotherapists and clergy), or there may be one of several forms of negotiated symbiosis (as with lawyers and accountants). Central to Abbott's model is his definition of *profession* itself, wholly founded on this competitive process. To Abbott, an occupation is a profession if (and only if) it can abstract its knowledge, not only to solve novel problems, but also to adapt its practices to new niches:

> "Many occupations fight for turf, but only professions expand their cognitive domain by using abstract knowledge to annex new areas, to define them as their own proper work. My theory of professional development thus creates my definition of professions." (p. 102)

Abbott invokes a healthcare metaphor of *diagnosis* → *inference* → *treatment* as an abstracted model of all professional problem-solving work. Each of these three phases, along with their strengths and vulnerabilities, is thoroughly explicated. 'Diagnosis' involves framing a problem in terms of the profession's domain. Thus, the inability to locate information in a workplace could be defended as a problem of search strategy, metadata, user experience, database schema, and so forth. 'Treatment' draws from the available toolkit of a given profession. Jurisdiction over both diagnosis and treatment is susceptible to new technologies or expertise claims from competing professions. However, it is *inference* – the uncertain space between diagnosis and treatment where tacit knowledge resides – that defines professional expertise, and that also represents a great deal of vulnerability. When the needed inference is simple, the work can be automated or claimed by subordinate occupational groups, such as clerks and technicians. On the other hand, where highly abstracted or esoteric inference is involved, outcome success is less certain, and the profession's legitimacy is therefore vulnerable.

The value of this complex theoretical territory becomes evident upon reaching the case study on the information professions, and their rapidly changing technical and social environment. The case initially stumbles on a definition of 'information professionals' as broadly concerned with "help(ing) clients overburdened with material from which they cannot retrieve usable information" (p. 216). In 2019 I can recognize that definition as comprising one part of my own field of knowledge management, but I cannot reconcile it with a broad characterization of information work at any point in history. One problem here is Abbott lumping together so-called "qualitative" information professions with librarians at the centre, and so-called "quantitative" information professions which include accounting and engineering. This classification serves to lay bare a clear gender divide, but that revelation is the only value I can find in situating these disparate fields under one tent.

However, the "qualitative information professions" narrative fully recovers as it traces the history of librarianship, and Abbott's model begins to provide a very compelling interpretation of the profession's first eight decades. He describes the tech-

nical threat of microfilm followed in time by computers; then there is new jurisdictional turf with the invention of the school librarian; we also read of the codification (and resulting degradation) of the once esoteric practice of cataloguing, to a lower, clerical stratum of the profession. It is a pity that Abbott's narrative necessarily ends before the proliferation of the Internet. Because the impact of the Internet continues to be visited upon all the information professions, insight into that process might be very useful for information practitioners, but perhaps even more so for students, who face a longer career horizon coupled with a window of opportunity to orient their professional education.

Today, information schools invoke the term 'information professional', but they do not define it. Nor is there any recognized broad ontology of information professions beyond 'librarian', nor even agreement about the relative contributory roles of fields such as computer science, cognitive science, anthropology, communication, sociology, and graphic design. (Nor, for that matter, will we even find a consensual definition for what is 'information'.) We tend to celebrate porous conceptual boundaries because they are inclusive and flexible. Abbott, however, would warn us that we risk our legitimacy in doing so; an inability to agree upon profession names or a basic lexicon may leave us vulnerable to attack by other professions in a rapidly changing social and technical world. In this regard, computer scientists may be the barbarians at the gate: Google, for example, has seized vast swathes of information retrieval turf. In addition, artificial intelligence may soon threaten the more esoteric problems of information and knowledge management. Abbott asserts that professions under siege can succeed and thrive by claiming other jurisdictions in turn, and we do indeed see this unfolding. For example, some information schools now teach 'user experience design', an emerging professional niche ignored (and therefore relinquished) by computer science professionals. Another embryonic example is given by the recently coined academic field of "digital humanities": this is being claimed by information schools and also by numerous other fields, as one might expect. Abbott provides a remarkable lens for making sense of all these developments.

Could Abbott's work be used to forecast the trajectory of the information professions? It is tempting to say yes. The survival-of-the-fittest dynamics within Abbott's system of professions appear to usefully explain current developments among the information professions, and this is a subject worthy of deeper study. However, Abbott's full theory is baroque, with a great many dimensions, variables, relationships, and contexts in which to compare them. That is a problem because there is no formula for weighting these, nor any way of gauging how they may interact, beyond a very great number of the author's own highly specific caveats. The implication is that we may predict where jurisdictions will be contested based on understanding the dynamics, but we will not know the outcomes in advance. To wield or teach Abbott's work fluently for this purpose, a unified visual model would be enormously helpful, but it is probably not possible to draw one. Despite complexity and limitations, Abbott's work may have remarkable utility for us.

Within the information professions, I can recommend this book to practitioners, profession leaders, and scholars. For practitioners, a framework is created for noticing and evaluating career opportunities and risks. For profession leaders, a lens is provided to prioritize the holding and seizing of jurisdiction as an important focus for safety and growth. For scholars, the model might be used to step beyond Abbott's own work, to enable, for example, an exploration of the causes and consequences of gender and race stratification among the emerging information professions. Because the explanatory power of Abbott's theory has been historical, its forward-looking value is an open question. However, in an era of rapid social and technological change for the information professions, a survival-of-the-fittest framework is certainly attractive.