Sanctuary: An Institutional Vision for the Digital Age*

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Abstract

Purpose Trends in information technology and contemplative practices compel us to consider the intersections of information and contemplation. This paper considers these intersections at the level of institutions.

Design/methodology/approach First, the notion of institution is defined and discussed, along with information institutions and contemplative institutions. Next, sanctuary is proposed and explored as a vision for institutions in the digital age.

Findings Sanctuary is a primordial human institution that has especial urgency in the digital age. This paper develops an info-contemplative framework for sanctuaries, including the elements: stability, silence, refuge, privacy, and reform.

Research limitations/implications This is a conceptual paper that, though guided by prior empirical and theoretical work, would benefit from application, validation and critique. This paper is meant as a starting point for discussions of institutions for the digital age.

Practical implications As much as this paper is meant to prompt further research, it also provides guidance and inspiration for professionals to infuse their work with aspects of sanctuary and be attentive to the tensions inherent in sanctuary.

Originality/value This paper builds on discourse at the intersection of information studies and contemplative studies, also connecting this with recent work on information institutions.

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1 Introduction

As information and communication technologies permeate ever more aspects of human life, we are continuing to learn more about the resulting effects, both negative and positive. In parallel, we are bearing witness to an efflorescence of interest in contemplative practices and experiences outside of traditional religious structures.

There seems to be a connection between these two observations. To give just one illustrative example, Cal Newport, in his book *Digital Minimalism*, investigates the anxieties and other adverse effects of always-on digital devices, and he recommends, in light of these issues, certain practices that could be described as contemplative, such as journaling on paper, walking in nature, and finding solitude (Newport, 2019).

But the precise connections between information and contemplation remain to be explored. There has been some recent academic work to this end. For example, Gorichanaz and Latham (2019) explore how information may appeal to contemplative aims, and Latham, Hartel, and Gorichanaz (2020) trace the shared contours of the fields of information studies and contemplative studies.

To date this work has mostly been focused at the level of the individual person. In this paper, I wish to contribute to a discussion at the level of institutions. In our work, Latham et al. (2020) asked if there might be an umbrella term capacious enough to include the institutions of both information and contemplation. In this paper, I propose an answer: sanctuary.

Springing from an examination of the literature on sanctuary, I propose a framework for info-contemplative sanctuaries with five elements: stability, silence, refuge, privacy, and reform. I hope for this framework to serve as a starting place for critical discussions about what sorts of institutions may be possible, productive or necessary for our human

future in the digital age. Such discussions, of course, are part of building, or radically reforming, institutions. In my view, sanctuary is a provocative institutional vision because, as I outline in the conclusion, it involves certain tensions—it is not a simple good. So attempting to establish any sort of sanctuary will bring to the surface a number of tradeoffs that must be considered and discussed.

2 What are institutions?

Like many abstract terms in everyday use, "institution" is hard to define. Our most ready-to-hand definitions of the term may refer to organizations such as churches and hospitals, yet we also use the term in phrases such as "the institution of marriage." Levin (2020) observes that academic inquiry on institutions has proliferated in recent decades, and definitions of "institution" are myriad and varied; in Levin's estimation, this is due to the different disciplinary perspectives involved. With this in mind, Levin proposes a definition meant to capture the breadth of the roles institutions play, describing them as "the durable forms of our common life [...] the frameworks and structures of what we do together" (Levin, 2020, p. 19). So far, this definition is in line with that used recently in information studies by Shaw (2019), attributed to North (1991): the definitions, rules and constraints, both formal and informal, that structure human interactions.

Fleshing out this definition, Shaw (2019) points out that institutions should not be confused with organizations or administrations, following the argument of Boltanski (2009/2011). Boltanski distinguishes institutions from organizations and administrations. For Boltanski, organizations coordinate action, and administrations enforce

formal laws, while institutions are rather a *semantic* category; institutions play the semantic role of the ongoing creation and maintenance of the definitions and rules that structure human life.

Levin (2020), on the other hand, contends that organizations and administrations are parts or kinds of institutions. Levin makes this distinction in terms of corporate structure. As he writes, organizations are types of institutions that have a legalized corporate form, such as universities, hospitals and schools. Other institutions are shaped by laws and norms but lack corporate structure, including the family, marriage and particular professions. Shaw (2019) notes that as institutions of the latter type become more and more established, they may take on corporate structure (thus, in his and Boltanski's view, ceasing to truly be institutions); for instance, Shaw cites the professionalization of librarianship, which has became corporatized with the foundation of organizations such as the American Library Association.

For Levin, there are two characteristics that unite both types of institutions:

1. **Durability**: Institutions tend to keep their shape; they change, but they do so incrementally. In this way, the form of an institution over time "exhibits a certain continuity that is fundamental to what it is able to accomplish in the world" (Levin, 2020, p. 19).

2. **Form of association**: Institutions are forms within which people come together and interact; an institution "is a form in the deepest sense: a structure, a shape, a contour [...] It is the shape of the whole, the arrangement that speaks of its purpose, its logic, its function, and its meaning" (Levin, 2020, p. 19).

In brief, institutions can be described in this way: "The institution organizes its

people into a particular form moved by a purpose, characterized by a structure, defined by an ideal, and capable of certain functions" (Levin, 2020, p. 20). Adherents to Boltanski's view might differ here, finding Levin's definition to be more descriptive of organizations or administrations; for Boltanski, institutions do not "organize" people, but rather provide grounds for people to organize. Levin might respond that organization unfolds in either case; in more corporate forms of institution, the organization is imposed, while in the less corporate forms, it is invited.

Institutions, broadly, can be thought of as a kind of tool. We humans shape tools, and in turn they shape us. For example, the proliferation of forks seems to have led to a change in our jaw alignment (Wilson, 2012). Likewise, people shape institutions, and institutions shape people. As such, institutions "give us an idea of what it means to form, to transform, to reform, to deform, to conform" (Levin, 2020, p. 20). Expounding on this, Levin writes:

> In other words, institutions are by their nature formative. They structure our perceptions and our interactions, and as a result they structure us. They form our habits, our expectations, and ultimately our character. By giving shape to our experience of life in society, institutions give shape to our place in the world and to our understanding of its contours. They are at once constraining and enabling. They are the means by which we are socialized, and so they are crucial intermediaries between our inner lives and our social lives. They are how the city and the soul come to shape each other, and in our free society they are essential to the formation of men and women fit to exercise that freedom responsibly. (Levin, 2020, p. 20)

Institutions structure all domains of human life. Here I will comment briefly

on institutions in the two domains most relevant to this paper: information and contemplation.

2.1 Information institutions

The term "information institution" appears frequently in our literature, seemingly as a shorthand to refer to galleries, libraries, archives and museums—the so-called GLAM sector of organizations. Even though these organizations, functionally speaking, may differ, they are grouped together on the basis of their institutional (semantic) role. But this is not the whole story of information institutions. Looking for less formal (i.e. not yet corporatized) institutions, we might identify academic peer review, communication norms in Facebook groups, and so on, as examples; but I am not aware of any authors who have conceptualized information institutions in this way.

To speak a bit more about information organizations, these are said to be places where information professionals work (Bates, 2015; Mason, 1990), i.e. where information activities are done. But today information activities have been largely de-professionalized, and information activities commonly take place outside GLAM organizations—we need not look further than work being done in the field of everyday life information behavior for evidence of this.

Consonantly, the information field seems to be de-emphasizing the role of its formal institutions. Indeed, this is endemic to the very notion of the "information field"; the iSchool Movement in particular has attempted to establish itself independent of any particular institutional commitments, and the very notion of the information professions has attempted to be institution-independent (Shaw, 2019). (This move away from institutions, as I will discuss below, is not by any means unique to the

information field.)

But the democratization of information activities does not mean that information activities need be de-institutionalized. After all, institutions are forms, and in*form*ation is fundamentally about forming people. So an argument can be made that we need stronger information institutions, if different ones. At heart, this is because the stakes are getting higher: today's information and communication technologies are growing in power, reach, speed, capacity, and so on, such that our mediated actions can affect people farther and wider than ever before. As we know, this has ramifications big and small, positive and negative. On one hand, when I'm far away from family and friends, we can keep in touch with each other through technologies. The very same technologies afford election manipulation and the spread of misinformation; and as our sociopolitical infrastructure moves online, it seems to be more susceptible to these sorts of exploitations.

2.2 Contemplative institutions

Contemplative practices and experiences arose early in the human story within the institutional contexts of value systems; as these systems became more formalized, they became what we may now refer to as religions (Komjathy, 2018). But today, in the United States and other countries, particularly in the Global North, contemplative practices have entered the zeitgeist for the most part without any formal institutional context, as secularized forms of participation. Indeed, in this milieu, "religion, understood as institutional religion, is usually seen as a hindrance or problem" (Komjathy, 2018, p. 147).

Komjathy cautions that contemplative practices may lose some of what made

them alluring and effective in the first place if they are stripped of their originary institutional context. He writes: "We should not reduce contemplative practice to method or technique. Instead, we may be attentive to at least the following dimensions: prerequisites, posture, breathing, technique, style, duration and format, location, aesthetics and material culture, and larger systems" (Komjathy, 2018, pp. 64–66). Under each of these dimensions he offers bulleted lists of items to consider. A few interesting ones:

- **Prerequisites**: community, ethical foundations, instruction or training, initiation or ordination, lineage, place
- **Location**: cave, desert, home, community center, forest, monastery, mountain, temple
- **Larger system**: anthropology, cosmology, dietetics, ethics, psychology, ritual, textual study, soteriology, theology

With respect to location, Latham, Hartel and I previously pointed out that GLAM organizations can also be locations for contemplative practices, and indeed they already are (Latham et al., 2020). Yoga and mindfulness meditation programs, for example, are being offered in museums and libraries. But such practices may be missing the other institutional dimensions that Komjathy identifies. And so while these additions to organizations' programming may provide some health and social benefits, they may not yet rise to the institutional level. It may be that, without their institutional embeddedness, contemplative practices are merely contemplative techniques.

Roberto Calasso has written of this phenomenon as a characteristic of *Homo saecularis*, or the contemporary secular person:

> In comparison with religious believers, secularists are like what tourists are to natives. Curious, sympathetic, sometimes enthusiastic, often impressed. And they, the tourists, are always buoyed up by one comforting thought: their return to the place they came from. In relation to natives, tourists are open-minded and flexible. [...] But what they see is never *the thing* that natives see, which could be (who can say?) the *ultimate thing*. [...] *Homo saecularis* is inevitably a tourist. (Calasso, 2019, pp. 55–56)

If there is any value in being a native over being a tourist, then it may be prudent to look for ways to embed the contemplative techniques that have been adapted into some form of institution.

2.3 Institutional critique and decay

Life is not possible without structure, but structure is only one letter away from stricture. That institutions form us can be a good thing—they give us each a purpose and lend our lives a sense of belonging. But on one hand, institutions may evolve too slowly to remain productive and relevant in a changing society, becoming, in a way, tyrannical (Appiah, 2005), and on the other hand, institutions can become corrupted, which is evident when they act in ways contrary to their avowed purpose, such as cases of abuse among clergy, teachers or psychologists. "In such situations, the institution is revealed to have been corrupted into serving those within it at the expense of its core purpose. Rather than shaping the people inside it, it comes to be deformed by them for their own ends" (Levin, 2020, p. 32).

This sort of corruption, and an ensuing loss of trust in our institutions, has been unfolding over the past few decades. Today, there is not much trust in institutions,

from marriage to the government. To speak of the U.S. context as an example, since the 1970s Gallup (2019) has been collecting survey data on Americans' trust in various institutions, and their results show a decline for nearly all of them (exceptions include the military and the Supreme Court).

Information institutions have not been immune to the anti-institutional current. This is epitomized in the iSchool Movement, which has established itself independent of any particularly information organizations; indeed, institutionlessness is to some extent inherent to the very notion of the "information professions." It is an additional curiosity that even though the library remains one of America's trusted institutions (Geiger, 2017), time and again anti-library rhetoric makes the rounds (Shaw, 2019). One example in recent memory was a quickly retracted article in *Forbes* suggesting that Amazon and Starbucks should replace the library to save taxpayers money (Peet & Yorio, 2018).

A reason for this decay of trust seems to be a new kind of individualism that arose in the 1970s. In *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, Boltanski and Chiapello (1999/2018) write that the widespread reaction against institutional structures, beginning in 1968, arose from a desire for liberation, a response to suffering, and a distaste for inauthenticity and egoism. At this time, institutions "were condemned as closed, fixed, ossified worlds, whether by attachment to tradition (the family), legalism and bureaucracy (the state), or calculation and planning (the firm), as opposed to mobility, fluidity, and 'nomads' able to circulate, at the cost of many metamorphoses, in open networks" (Boltanski & Chiapello, 1999/2018, p. 145). Institutions came to be interpreted as oppressive hierarchies which did not accord with the unfolding social movements around, for example, feminism, gay rights and environmentalism. These conditions

led to a new "spirit" of capitalism, in which the ideal person is one who wants to move in a streamlined way, not unlike Calasso's *Homo saecularis* (Calasso, 2019), and so frees themselves of anything that may hinder movement, like owning a house or having a role (and thus responsibilities) within an institution.

A simple framework for understanding the way institutions have changed is given by Levin (2020). He theorizes institutions in terms of molds and platforms:

- As **molds**, institutions entail constraints that help their members mature in pro-social ways.
- As **platforms**, institutions give their members ways to communicate their own views to wide audiences.

In other words, molds *form* people, while platforms allow people to *perform*. In Levin's estimation, many American institutions have shifted from being primarily molds to being primarily platforms for freewheeling *Homo saecularis*, leading to the lack of trust in these institutions. While we may feel ourselves to be better off as free agents in this new form of society, the absence of healthy institutions in our lives may be contributing to diseases of despair, such as depression and addiction, as well as a broader sense of a lack of life meaning and belonging (Levin, 2020). "What we are missing, although we too rarely put it this way, is not simply connectedness but a structure of social life: a way to give shape, place, and purpose to the things we do together" (Levin, 2020, p. 17).

In his book, Levin calls for a rebuilding of our institutions; presumably, this includes both formal and informal ones, but most of his examples relate to formal institutions, such as universities and Congress. His view can be contrasted with that of Boltanski

(2009/2011), who calls for humble institutions that work to slow the pace of change and give form to life without overreaching into tyranny; to do so, they must be sensitive to their being "more or less lousy" (Boltanski, 2009/2011, p. 157), contingent, and constantly up for renegotiation.

3 Sanctuary

Our present era of networked *Homo saecularis* has given rise to new forms of exploitation and control through digital technologies, as chronicled by Zuboff (2019) in her book *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism.* Zuboff argues that Google and other internet-based firms are creating a new form of capitalism rooted in the monetization of human experience. While in earlier forms of capitalism firms used consumer data to improve their offerings, in this new form of capitalism, consumer data becomes an end in itself—a new revenue stream. In this new paradigm, human experience is captured and commodified; and over time more and more domains of human life come to be subjected to tracking and monetization.

Whereas digital technology was promised to allow equal participation by and new opportunities for everyone, the reality of surveillance capitalism, on Zuboff's account, destroys democracy and individual autonomy both, and it has led to an always-on culture of busyness and speed. Late in her book, Zuboff considers a few ways to course-correct humanity, one of which is the re-institutionalization of the right to sanctuary. She writes:

> the very first citadel to fall is the most ancient: the principle of sanctuary. The sanctuary privilege has stood as an antidote to power since the begin-

> ning of the human story. Even in ancient societies where tyranny prevailed, the right to sanctuary stood as a fail-safe. There was an exit from totalizing power, and that exit was the entrance to a sanctuary in the form of a city, a community, or a temple. (Zuboff, 2019, p. 478)

As Zuboff (2019) describes, sanctuaries became sites of asylum, or protected space (the Greek "asylon" meaning "unplunderable"). A right to sanctuary remained institutionalized through the eighteenth century in much of Europe. As the rule of law became more established, the right to sanctuary gradually became obsolete; in a sense, the law itself became a sanctuary, as in the notion of "inalienable" rights. At this time the home became a person's de facto sanctuary, where they were free from surveillance and intrusion. And though, for the most part, our legal systems protect our homes from intrusion by the state, Zuboff is now worried about in-home surveillance by corporate Big Other (rather than a governmental Big Brother) in the form of tracking on websites and smart devices. Zuboff recalls Erving Goffman's theater metaphor for self-presentation—sometimes we are onstage, sometimes off—and observes that today, in real life, we have no exit.

In light of this discussion, we are invited to reconsider the right to sanctuary for the modern day. Before doing so, we should work to understand more deeply just what sanctuary means.

3.1 What is sanctuary?

To begin with definitions found in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "sanctuary" refers, first and foremost, to a holy or sacred place. The -ary of sanctuary refers to a container (from the Latin suffix -arium); hence a sanctuary is a container of the holy or sacred. "Holy,"

of course, has religious connotations, suggesting something revered or perfect, such as a deity. Etymologically, the word is related to "healthy" and "whole." Fundamentally, being holy implies a separation: a holy thing is dedicated for a specific purpose; it is set apart from other things, especially because of its purity or perfection. In this sense, "holy" and "sacred" are synonyms: something sacred is something that has been made holy by recognizing it and setting it apart. An influential theorist of the sacred was sociologist Émile Durkheim, who conceptualized the distinction between sacred and profane as the central concept of religion. For Durkheim (1915), the sacred is institutionalized; it represents group interests and norms. The profane, on the other hand, is everyday and individual. By its very nature, then, sanctuary is institutional. It relies on shared notions of what is healthy, whole and worth separating and protecting.

Rabben (2016) chronicles the human history of sanctuary, placing its origins at "the very foundation of our species" (p. 29). Some of the first recorded references to the institution of sanctuary appear in the Old Testament, where "rules establishing 'cities of refuge' for manslayers are laid out [...] in the Book of Numbers and Deuteronomy, compiled more than 2,500 years ago" (p. 32). As Rabben writes, traditions of asylum in Ancient Egypt may be even older still; in any case, the institution of sanctuary has been carried forward from antiquity to the present day.

As also mentioned by Zuboff (2019), sanctuary in Greek and Roman times came to mean a demarcated area of safety surrounding a temple; in the Christian era, it referred to churches. The right of sanctuary or asylum was recognized in British common law as early as the fourth century and as late as the seventeenth. As Zuboff (2019) and Rabben (2016) describe, it became attenuated over time. To this day, though, from time to time the traditional protections of religious sanctuary are tested, even

though they do not have the same legal enforcement they once did, and sometimes these tests are successful. For example, early 2019 saw a migration policy change in the Netherlands after a family of Armenian refugees sought sanctuary in a church for over three months (Paris, 2019). Dutch law still prohibits authorities from entering a church to make arrests during services, so the church ran worship from October 26, 2018, to January 30, 2019, to protect the family.

The notion of sanctuary seems to have had a resurgence beginning around the 1980s as part of broader anti-war movements. Today we use the word in a handful of contexts, such as "bird sanctuaries," or spaces where certain species of flora and fauna see special protection, and "sanctuary cities," most notably in the United States, which are cities that pledge minimal enforcement of immigration law.

3.2 Toward info-contemplative sanctuaries

Our digital devices have opened us up to endless streams of social media content, news, emails, articles, entertainment options, and on and on. This is, by now, a trivial observation. Less noticed are other forms of information pollution (Benke & Benke, 2013), such as all-night artificial lighting and music playing in every shop and restaurant (an example from Floridi, 2013, p. 257). Perhaps less noticed still are the digital surveillance measures that we cannot even detect, from the tracking of our web and social media activities to the proliferation of smart devices that monetize ever more of our life experiences. Zuboff writes memorably, "There was a time when you searched Google. But now, Google searches you" (Zuboff, 2019, p. 262).

Recall that the concept of sanctuary relies on the possibility of separation from an environment. As internet technologies proliferate and we enter more fully into the

age of ubiquitous, pervasive and ambient computing, the distinction between online and offline is disappearing (Floridi, 2013). If we live in smart cities and smart homes, and work in smart offices, relying on our ever-present smartphones to bridge the gaps, then where might we find sanctuary?

Zuboff (2019), in her writing, is concerned with reclaiming the right to sanctuary in the digital space and the everyday lived space of internet-enabled devices. There are crucial questions here. Moreover, we in information studies might wonder what the GLAM organizations could do to champion this right as well. What role might GLAMs play in modeling and promulgating the sanctuary as a form of information institution for the 21st century?

As it happens, these questions were posed over a decade ago. *Information, Silence, and Sanctuary* was a conference held in 2004 at University of Washington (Levy, 2007). The aims of the conference were to explore issues around information overload and the acceleration of daily life and "to propose a way of framing and organizing these questions, and through this framing to suggest a means of addressing them" (Levy, 2007, p. 234). Levy draws a connection with the environmental movement, which was kickstarted by the 1962 book *Silent Spring*, and he wonders if we are at the beginning of a similar movement. What might be the *Silent Spring* of the information balance movement? The conference, Levy writes, was intended to raise questions, if not answer them.

> What do we mean by silence? Why and to what extent do we need it? To what extent do we need sanctuary in, or from, cyberspace, and how might we achieve this? What do we humans already know that might help us achieve greater balance in the face of the unsettling effects of the new

information technologies and practices? (Levy, 2007, p. 234)

For Levy's part, he focused on this last question. His answer was, in a word, *contemplation*, which characterized his subsequent work. For my part, I am picking up the thread of his question about sanctuary.

In the context of information, what might sanctuary mean? Based on the discussion of sanctuary above and considering the recent unfolding of information technology, we can sketch some preliminary requirements:

- A place (literal or metaphorical) to exit
  - Which has not been marketized
  - Which is free from surveillance
- Shared agreement on what in life is sacred, i.e. off limits
- Norms that have both common consensus and legal protection

Before further developing a view of informational-contemplative sanctuary, it is worth traversing the literature in information studies for other precedents. Indeed, there are some examples referring to libraries and museums as sanctuaries.

3.2.1 Library as sanctuary

The library has been conceptualized as, on one hand, a sanctuary for people, and on the other, a sanctuary for information. To begin with people, Cart (1992) writes that, since his boyhood, the public library has been "a place of blessed sanctuary from my daily dragons [...] the terrifying exigencies which plague daily life" (p. 6). He

compares libraries to churches in this regard, saying "both are places of peace and of celebration—of the spirit and the intellect, respectively" (p. 7). Also invoking the peacefulness of sanctuary, Choy and Goh (2016) include "sanctuary space" in their framework for planning academic library spaces. In this framework, an academic library has four components: collaborative space, sanctuary space, interaction space, and community space. Sanctuary space is quiet (for studying), allows students to be alone (for drawing their own conclusions and building their own ideas), and minimizes unwanted stimuli (silence in a broader sense, affording focus without distraction). They write: "Sanctuary and collaborative spaces are the yin and yang of the library building. They both must exist to complement each other" (Choy & Goh, 2016, p. 21).

For Cart (1992), a defining aspect of the public library's sanctuary is encapsulated in the inscription outside his hometown library: FREE TO ALL (p. 8). In an increasingly diverse and fractured society, the library "respects what we all have in common despite our differences: our basic humanity. Today's library is not necessarily a community center but it is a center for community—for communing, for co-mingling, for common possession and participation. It is a sanctuary. A refuge. A safe harbor" (Cart, 1992, p. 22). Cart notes that being a free-to-all sanctuary is particularly challenging when the presence of one person offends another (the smell of the homeless, in his example). But he concludes that the library must remain open to all, because even while some will abuse their access, enough others will use the library's resources to, for example, "transform [...] from a homeless ex-con and day laborer into a fulltime free-lance writer" (Brennan, 1992, p 38). So Cart argues, "while the library may not legally be a lounge or a shelter, it remains, *morally*, I believe a sanctuary and a refuge" (Cart, 1992, p. 16). In a blog post, Saunders (2017) affirms similar points, emphasizing that

the library's role as a free-to-all sanctuary is especially important in sanctuary cities.

Cart (1992) emphasizes the intellectual and civic aspects of the library in his discussion of sanctuary, but Pyati (2019) would take this further, highlighting "the valuable affective dimensions of these institutions" (Pyati, 2019, p. 357). To this end, Pyati writes of the need to resist market tendencies in the library (e.g. referring to the public as "customers"), as well as the "McMindfulness" tendencies of commodifying mindfulness in library programs; he suggests this vision aligns well with progressive librarianship. Relatedly, Levy (2007) mentions in his summary of the *Information, Silence, and Sanctuary* conference that, at the event, Susan Leigh Star "described the modern library as not only a place where information is provided but as a public, contemplative space—a sanctuary" (Levy, 2007, p. 235); unfortunately, the text of Star's contribution does not seem to be available.

Next, the idea of sanctuary has been invoked in the library literature to describe the institution as a refuge for books and other precious objects. Here the familiar tension between preservation and access arises. Athanasiu (2015) describes this issue particularly with artists' books, which on one hand are fragile and valuable works of art unto themselves and on the other can be information sources. As artists' books are being collected in rare books and special collections, they disrupt access and, on her account, make it more difficult for library users to develop a sense of belonging. She cites literary publisher Andrew Steeves: "One negative side effect of the library-as-sanctuary is that it perpetuates the idea that the books we use in our daily lives are somehow merely ordinary, and that real truth, real beauty and real quality does not reside in them, but resides elsewhere, protected in the collections of great institutions from our clumsy, prosaic ordinariness" (Steeves, 2014, p. 27). Referring to sanctuary

with a more positive connotation, Kranich (2000), then President-Elect of the American Library Association, concluded that "libraries can offer sanctuaries for alternative voices and should ensure that they have diverse collections that truly represent the full spectrum of published opinion" (p. 85). Yet "library collections are increasingly looking more and more alike" (p. 87), suggesting that they are not providing sanctuary for the books that are not finding shelter elsewhere.

So while there are tensions with both conceptions of the library as sanctuary (for people and for books), authors have suggested that there is a moral obligation for the library to be a sanctuary in both ways. Libraries must, however, balance the sometimes-conflicting interests of the public just as they must balance preservation and access.

3.2.2 Museum as sanctuary

Besides libraries, there have been limited discussions of other types of information organizations as sanctuaries, such as museums. Decades ago, Zolberg (1984) articulated in the art museum context an access/preservation issue similar to what Athanasiu (2015) raises. "On the one hand, art museums have an interest in providing sanctuary for study or quiet appreciation; on the other, they are impelled to provide service to a broad public whose very presence jeopardizes this goal" (Zolberg, 1984, p. 380). Zolberg suggests that growing crowds and conversation-oriented programming threatened to undermine the possibility of museum as sanctuary, emphasizing the peace and silence aspects of sanctuary. Since then, museums have been exploring how these competing interests might be reconciled. For example, Smith and Zimmermann (2017) describe the "Sanctuary Series" at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum,

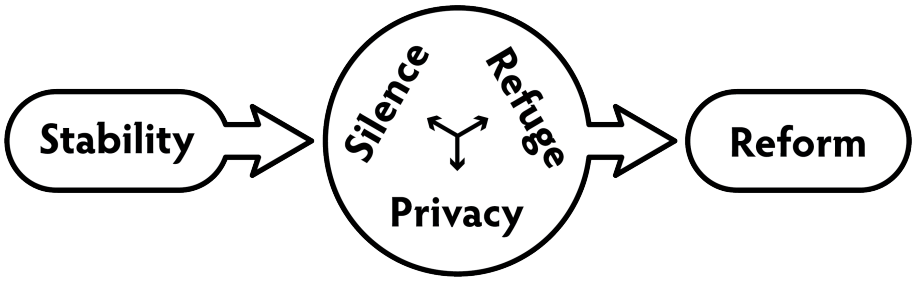

Figure 1: Major elements in the framework for info-contemplative sanctuaries

which involves programming for small groups that emphasize playful, creative and contemplative experiences.

More recently, and emphasizing the conceptualization of sanctuary as refuge, Friesen (2019) documents how some museums have mobilized to serve as sanctuary spaces for their communities in the immediate aftermath of a crisis. According to her findings, museums have employed specific tactics, such as: offering free admission and issuing press releases to spread the word; organizing specific crisis-relevant programming; engaging the staff in a sense of purpose, often in conjunction with the organization's mission; and engaging other community partner organizations as well. Friesen notes that the museums that have responded to crisis have been limited to art and cultural museums; she asks: what role might children's, history, science and other types of museums play as sanctuaries?

4 A framework for info-contemplative sanctuaries

Based on the discussion above, I propose a nascent framework for informational-contemplative sanctuaries. This framework has five elements: stability, silence, refuge, privacy, and reform (see Figure 1). Each of these elements will be discussed in turn.

4.1 Stability

The foundational element of sanctuary is its stability. To be sure, this may be the case for any institution—stability seems to be endemic to the concept, as Levin (2020) suggests. With sanctuary, though, stability takes on a deeper meaning.

As discussed above, sanctuary is a place (literal or metaphorical) of holiness, and holiness is often connected to the infinite and everlasting. Given that historical accounts of sanctuary began with the ancient Hebrews (Rabben, 2016), we might cite the Hebrew Bible to demonstrate the connection between holiness and stability. To give two examples, Isaiah (26:4) refers to God as "an everlasting rock"; and Psalm 72:17 reads, "May His name endure forever." From Greek temples to Gothic cathedrals, the physical sites of sanctuary were built of stone and meant to last centuries—a testament to the stability of their sanctuary. The stability of sanctuary, then, provides not only the basis for its being an institution, but also a connection to the divine.

While on one hand stability may connote rock-like unchangingness, it may also refer to a certain quality of resilience and responsiveness. Life itself is said to be stable in this sense, evolving slowly and responsively over time (Pross, 2012). Applied to our institutions, the principle of stability would advocate for change to be done cautiously, as opposed to the "move fast and break things" paradigm popularized by Facebook (Garcia Martinez, 2016). In technological products, such stability may be borne out in changes to the standard product life cycle: rather than buying a new widget every year, perhaps the old one could be maintained, repaired, upgraded and modified (Walker, 2011).

4.2 Refuge

A place that is stable is one in which we can take refuge. There can be no rest in quicksand. First, a refuge is a place of safety, offering protection from outside forces. These forces may be real or imagined, just or unjust. Historically, sanctuaries protected murderers, political refugees and lost souls alike. As Cart (1992) observed of his public library, a sanctuary is "free to all."

More deeply, a refuge is a place where a person may feel a sense of home and belonging. Home is a need for human beings; Heidegger (1927/2010), for example, discussed the anxiety that arises when a person feels not-at-home; this anxiety prevents a person from engaging with things meaningfully (what he calls equipment). When one's house ceases to provide the protections of a home, then a sense of home must be sought elsewhere. This is what Heidegger describes as a flight from anxiety.

It is easy to see how one's house ceases to be homely in the case of a political refugee; but Zuboff (2019) suggests that even middle-class American homes may lose their homeliness once sufficiently infiltrated by unscrupulous smart technologies. If we do not feel at home in the smart home, we should ask ourselves why. Such a feeling was certainly not part of earlier visions for the year 2020. In fact, in their 1996 article "The Coming Age of Calm Technology," Weiser and Brown (1996) said explicitly that successful ubiquitous computing technologies should "put us at home, in a familiar place" (para. 31). As Weiser and Brown write, so-called calm technologies could do this by leveraging the periphery of our attention and allowing users to bring information from the periphery to the center, and back. Their vision is one of personal agency and environmental understanding; such agency and understanding are precisely what are undermined in the logic of surveillance capitalism, which relies on the user not

knowing what information (about them) is being collected and transmitted. So the safety of refuge is not just about physical protection, but about one's place within and relationship to their information environment.

Returning to institution theory, we might wonder whether institutions can provide refuge in and of themselves, or whether refuge only emerges as a byproduct of being outside the limits of a different institution. In Medieval Europe, the Church seems to have been able to offer refuge; and Levin (2020) would likely say that institutions today can do so as well. On Boltanski's (2009/2011) account, however, it seems institutions can only define their own limits; in Boltanski's sense, refuge is a place outside a given institution, but not outside *every* institution—seeking refuge from the state, a criminal seeking sanctuary enters the institution of the Church.

4.3 Silence

Next, a sanctuary provides silence. In a literal sense, silence means the absence of sound. But of course this is only possible in a vacuum; in our lived worlds, we cannot find such literal silence. But we can experience silence. Silence comes to us as spaciousness for the psyche. Experientially, silence is not an absence (e.g. of sound), but a mode wherein "conscience speaks" (Heidegger, 1927/2010, p 263). This is echoed in the framework for planning academic library spaces developed by Choy and Goh (2016). The concept of sanctuary space that they develop is characterized by silence:

> To reflect a more nuanced interpretation of quietness or silence, we use the term sanctuary to describe spaces conducive to the formation of knowledge and insight in an individual. A silent environment is desirable for reflection, introspection, review, contemplation, analysis, creative thinking, writing,

> etc., in fact any activity that requires a sense of communion with oneself in order to think and create knowledge. Although the word sanctuary is associated with religion, it also connotes a sense of peace, individual cultivation, freedom from distraction, harm and the hustle and bustle of a hurried life. (Choy & Goh, 2016, pp. 20–21)

Silence, then, is what allows for introspection and interiority. If institutions are meant to form individuals, as Levin (2020) writes, then silence is what allows for the kind of formation that can be done in, for example, a library. As GLAM organizations (and technology design more broadly) come to focus on social and collaborative experiences much more than individual ones, possibilities for silence may be attenuated (Gorichanaz & Latham, 2019).

It is important to note that the experience of silence can be engendered in different ways for different people. For one person, some background music might be conducive to an experience of silence, and yet that same music might be experienced by another person as a distracting cacophony; some may need to be alone to experience silence, while others may experience silence in the company of others. Intuiting this, Choy and Goh (2016) suggest that the silence of sanctuary can be achieved in the library by providing multiple gradations of physical silence: individual carrels, single study rooms, monitored large rooms, and spaces where the use of digital technology is prohibited.

Interpreted more broadly to apply to the infosphere beyond just libraries, silence seems to involve unplugging. This is a matter of being away from information technology in order to process the information one already has, thus experiencing the kind of agency and understanding that allowed a place to become a refuge in the first place.

4.4 Privacy

> Those who would eviscerate sanctuary are keen to take the offensive, putting us off guard with the guilt-inducing question "What have you got to hide?" But as we have seen, the crucial developmental challenges of the self–other balance cannot be negotiated adequately without the sanctity of "disconnected" time and space for the ripening of inward awareness and the possibility of reflexivity: reflection on and by oneself. The real psychological truth is this: *If you've got nothing to hide, you are nothing.* (Zuboff, 2019, p. 479)

It would be an understatement to say that privacy is a burgeoning topic in academia and the public sphere. In the context of sanctuary, privacy is vital because we humans need privacy, a place in the interior, to be ourselves. Pedersen (1997), for example, outlines six functions of privacy that help a person access their self. In modern discussions of privacy, this notion goes back to Warren and Brandeis (1890), who defines privacy as a right to personality. Going further back, it is a view that has reverberated through the history of philosophy. Plato, in *Republic*, argues that a virtue of democracy (one of three types of government he analyzes) is that it allows a person to live a private life (i.e. a non-government one). Moreover, in the very form of the dialogue, he shows that a private life is requisite for doing philosophy—the characters practice philosophy in Polemarchus' home for much of the book.

In her book *How to Disappear*, Busch (2019) reviews the psychological import of privacy in our digital age. In one chapter, she argues that, for each of us, the ability to experience things that only we can experience, which are self-initiated, is an important part of becoming who we are (and not just experiencing who we already

were); she points to a blurred line between fantasy and reality. In this way, privacy in an information context is not just about semantic or intellectual information; it is also about the deeper aspects of self-formation. In his paper on public libraries as contemplative spaces, Pyati (2019) describes this well:

> Ironically, while these institutions emphasise their role as purveyors of information, their more profound contributions may actually lie in the promotion of the inner lives of their patrons (Wiegand, 2015). This point is particularly true in an age of information overload; thus while many patrons still come to the library in search of information, an increasing number of patrons may actually be seeking refuge from hyper-stimulation and the overly demanding claims of technology. In essence, we may be *escaping* information when entering the library, and not always seeking it as is most often assumed. (Pyati, 2019, p. 360)

To be sure, if privacy is understood as an individual human right, a core of personal protection outside of which anything goes, then offering privacy may not do much to address the issues of institutional decay and marketization described above. For this reason, we should interpret privacy in an ontological, "e-nvironmental" sense (Floridi, 2013). This amounts to the point that we collectively need ontological friction—the barriers and obstacles to information flow—to become selves as part of the ontic trust. This has been suggested previously, though not explicitly in connection with privacy, such as in terms of self-care through technology use (Gorichanaz, 2019) and the information balance model of information behavior (Poirier & Robinson, 2014). To speak of institutions, with structures in place that allow for interiority and self-reflection, reform and other sorts of action may result.

4.5 Reform

Refuge, silence and privacy open a space for rest, reflection and renewal. Some of this reflection may be critical reflection, to echo Shaw's (2019) articulation of institutions of critical reflexive practice, which may lead to productive change in self and society. Such change can broadly be referred to as reform.

Reform has always been part of the institution of sanctuary. In the Middle Ages, for example, those who claimed sanctuary typically went into exile for the rest of their lives after a maximum period of 40 days in sanctuary (Jordan, 2015). Sanctuary, then, isn't a place to go into and stay forevermore. Humans could not be fully human in the Garden of Eden; and as the saying goes, "A ship in harbor is safe, but that is not what ships are built for." Rather, sanctuary is a pool we dip into during times of need. A person who goes into sanctuary should expect to emerge changed, ready to enter a new phase of life and act in the world differently.

While Levin (2020), along with Cart (1992), focuses on the reform of individuals within an institution, it is worth noting that (Boltanski, 2009/2011) and consequently Shaw (2019) focus on how institutions can contribute to reforming themselves. For Boltanski, such reform is not simply incremental improvement, but radical restructuring when this becomes necessary. Reform in this sense is necessary, lest institutions become utterly detached from reality and collapse—and so institutional critique should not be feared or avoided, but seen as constructive and emancipatory.

5 Tensions in Sanctuary

In this paper, I have proposed the concept of sanctuary as a guiding vision for institutions in the digital age, bringing together information and contemplation. In information studies, we should ask: What role might GLAMs play in championing the right to sanctuary? Yet we also need to recognize that GLAM organizations represent only one type of institution; the vision of sanctuary may permeate even less formal sorts of institutions that afford and constrain human activity.

I would like to conclude this paper with an image: the Faraday Chair, a speculative design by Dunne & Raby, created in 1995 (see Figure 2). Typically in design one seeks to solve a problem or answer a question, e.g. by creating a commercial product; in speculative design, one seeks to problematize a situation or pose a question by creating something that sparks conversation (Dunne & Raby, 2013). To me, the Faraday Chair encapsulates the notion of sanctuary, but not because it provides a perfect solution; rather, because it sparks the kind of dialectic that is necessary for building institutions.

With the Faraday Chair, Dunne & Raby respond to societal concerns about electromagnetic radiation being emitted from computers and their attendant infrastructure. Even if these in particular may not be considered harmful today, perhaps we might consider the Faraday Chair in response to the cognitive effects of ubiquitous computing and information overload. The Faraday Chair provides refuge; it is a large, transparent rectangular prism, tinted orange, in which a person can lie down:

> Conventional chairs offer us degrees of physical comfort, but the designers are proposing that the Faraday Chair might offer us psychological comfort by providing sanctuary. The tank is only large enough to allow the user

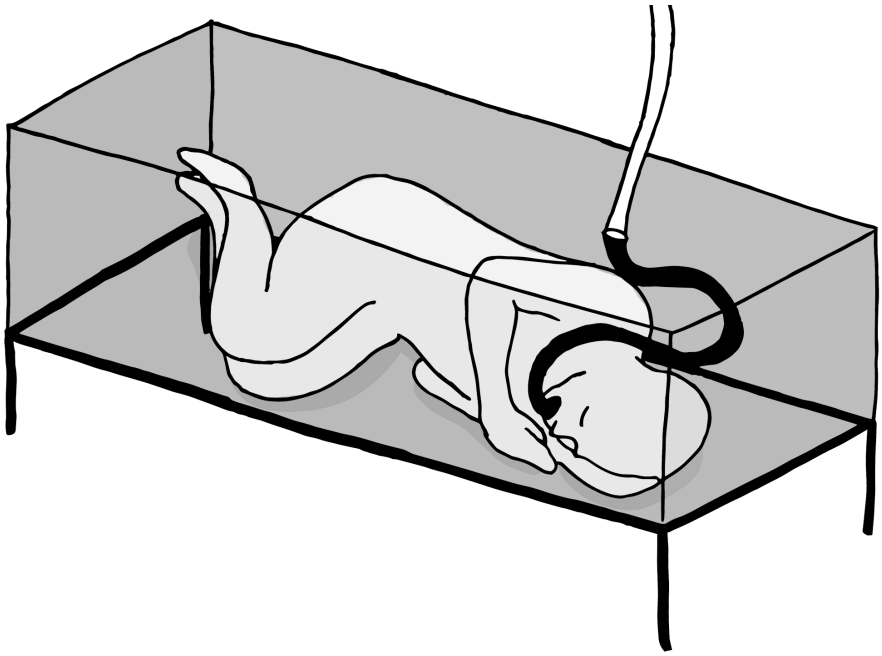

Figure 2: An illustration of the Faraday chair, originally designed by Dunne & Raby

> to lie in a foetal position, which encourages us to see it as womblike and protecting. But it is also tomblike and restrictive, like a sarcophagus. It has positive and negative connotations of imprisonment as well as shelter, which are different ways of regarding security, and its association with the executioner's electric chair cannot be overlooked. Therefore it is deliberately an ambiguous object, open to different interpretations. (V&A, n.d., para. 2)

In my view, this design encapsulates well the notion of sanctuary and—importantly—its inherent tensions. On the surface, the notion of sanctuary has only positive connotations. But when one digs deeper, as we have done in this paper, certain tensions arise. The Faraday Chair offers stability, refuge, silence, privacy and reform.

And yet, it is quite disturbing.

Similar tensions have been part of sanctuary from the start. Historically, for example, those offering sanctuary rightly want to protect those seeking asylum, and perhaps rightly want to offer a second chance to those who have done wrong; but it may not be just to give a free pass to every criminal. Moreover, in the Middle Ages sanctuary was only a temporary shelter, and those claiming sanctuary were not far from permanent exile. Nowadays, with the idea of sanctuary being applied to migration (in the United States, for instance), it is understandable that humanitarians would like to keep families together and support justice in migration, but surely migration law should not be done away with *tout court*.

To speak of info-contemplative sanctuaries, we can discern any number of tensions. Returning to the notion of library as sanctuary, there is an undeniable tension between access and preservation, as discussed above with regard to artists' books. In this paper I have described silence as a productive feature of sanctuary; but silence can also be a form of oppression (Star & Bowker, 2007), and this has been documented with respect to African Americans in particular (Fordham, 1993). And while many people today experience information overload and may benefit from unplugging, some may be harmed from certain forms of unplugging, such as a gay teen living among religious conservatives. There are small examples, too: I am writing during a novel coronavirus pandemic, when all universities have moved to remote or online teaching; a colleague told me that, in the early days of remote teaching, her students co-opted an entire session to discuss their feelings on the situation. Such discussion, too be sure, is healing and necessary, yet this came at the cost of losing a whole day of class material and falling behind.

The point is that sanctuary comes at a cost, inherently so: We may at once wish to protect and keep safe, but also reform. Initially we might regard costs and tensions as negatives, but perhaps they can be productive. As our world grows more and more complex due to globalization and technological development, easy and quick answers are getting harder to come by. When we design any sort of solution, we must always make tradeoffs, a notion that has been encapsulated, for instance, in the design tensions framework (Tatar, 2007). So if we want sanctuary, there are ambiguities and contradictions that we have to live with. This, indeed, has been the lesson of democracy from the start; as Plato shows in *Republic*, fruitful democratic participation relies on dialectic, and for dialectic to happen, we need to make sure there are protected spaces allowing for it happen—but such protected space cannot be the only spaces there are.

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