the
RADICAL
promise of the
academic library

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barbara fister | ILA ACRL 2014

Abstract: With all the talk of MOOCs, disruption, and thinking like a start-up, librarians are anxious about obsolescence and irrelevance. As academic libraries are asked to prove their value to their host institution and strive to develop platforms that are as frictionless as Google and Amazon, what are we giving up? Though the apocalyptic rhetoric of change urges us to do things differently, *right now,* before it's too late, libraries' enduring values offer a template for a better future. In this session, we'll examine the ways library values can challenge inequality and oppression and we'll consider ways that librarians can be agents of change – both to improve our practice and for the greater good.

When you say the word "library" to most people, the word "radical" likely doesn't come to mind unless, perhaps, you are an FBI agent or a frustrated employee of Homeland Security. We are, in Michael Moore's words, "just sitting there at the desk, all quiet and everything." We're mostly nice white ladies , to use nina de jesus's thought-provoking [phrase](). We're unassuming and unassailable, promoting nice things like books and reading and literacy and correct APA citations. But (to finish Moore's quote) it's subversion with a smile. "They're like plotting the revolution, man. I wouldn't mess with them." He said this back in 2002, when his publisher was reluctant to release his book *Stupid White Men* because it seemed risky to criticize the president after a terrorist attack had made criticism seem at the very least in bad taste if not actively

nice white ladies

treasonous. Moore didn't want to delete his critical references to the president and expected the entire print run would be pulped. Until a librarian, hearing it was at risk, objected, told other librarians who also objected, showed that a lot of people thought pulping the book was a bad idea, and the publisher was persuaded to change its mind. That stance against suppressing risky ideas coupled with the power to spread the word impressed the muckraker.

Of course, there is nothing actually subversive about arguing against politically-motivated censorship. In spite of the fact that books are challenged regularly, few Americans think censorship is a good thing. In fact, the values librarians espouse seem obviously good, the apple pie of aspirations. Yet in fundamental ways, they run entirely counter to the way that people almost unreflectively believe things work today. This puts librarians in an interesting position that should feel very familiar. We're always trying new things and we foster diversity and critical thought. We are also deeply conservative because one of our roles in society is preserving the record of the past. On top of that, we are, to a large extent, nice white ladies who provide excellent customer service. But here's why our values are radical.

< rant >

In an era when market forces are presumed to govern human behavior and consumerism is intrinsically tied to our notion of what a prosperous society looks like, the idea of "free to all" when not accompanied by a 55-page terms of service which includes surrender every detail of your personal life seems wildly out of sync with our economic and political assumptions. Sharing, which we are not the product, is frequently redefined as theft. If we had to invent libraries today as public institutions, would be allowed to do so? I'm not sure. Our consumerist devotion to choice has had unintended consequences. Remember when the mantra was "access, not ownership?" Signing giant database licenses seemed like a deal too good to refuse – more stuff, no storage costs! Today we see what we lost in that bargain. We need to support an open access alternative because access that leaves ownership in the hands of corporations isn't access, it's conditional rental for the privileged.

How can we advocate for the value of privacy in a digital environment in which our largest commercial platforms for finding and sharing information are financed through the aggregation and reuse of personal information? How do we make a case that privacy matters when both big business and the state are saying it doesn't and that you have nothing to worry about unless you're one of the bad guys. (Wanting privacy automatically makes you a bad guy.) I'm also deeply concerned by the ways we are being encouraged to gather and use data about our patrons to prove our value even if it goes against our values to do so.

Do academic libraries really support democracy, or do we increasingly devote scarce resources to providing the greatest return on investment to our host institutions which are, in turn, competing against one another for students and resources? What are we doing to reverse trends that have made higher education an incubator for debt and inequality rather than a nurturer of self-discovery, social mobility, and the greater good? What are we doing to support democracy in the world at large? Do we even support democracy in our own organizations, or do library workers always have to seek permission from someone with more power?
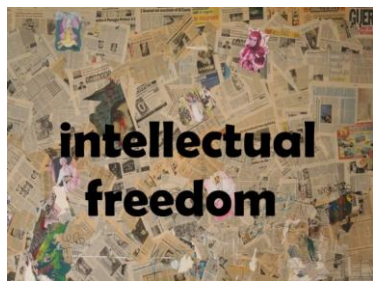
What must we do to ensure that our collections are as diverse as our students and the world they live in? How do we welcome people of color into a profession that is blindingly white (in every sense of the word). What voices are silenced in our libraries? How do even recognize the ways we participate in oppression when most of us enjoy privilege that we don't even recognize?

What do we really mean by that? Is education the practice of freedom, or is it simply scheme for using government-secured loans to charge students for workforce training? How can academic librarians resist the commodification of education and support lifelong learning when so many of the tools and resources we have encouraged students to use become instantly unavailable upon graduation? What can we do to balance students' understandable fear of failure while encouraging the skills and habits of mind that prepare students to engage with knowledge in all kinds of settings, not just academic environments, and invite them to assert their own ideas? What would transferrable, deep learning look like and how can librarians help make it happens?

That's a tough one when we're told that we must be neutral. The very existence of a social institution that values intellectual freedom is anything but neutral. How can we turn this platitude into action? Because even as we defend freedom, we have to insist that evidence matters, that ethical methods matter, that some ideas are bad and dangerous and "whatever" isn't synonymous with intellectual freedom. We also need to vocally and materially support people who are taking great risks to support intellectual freedom.
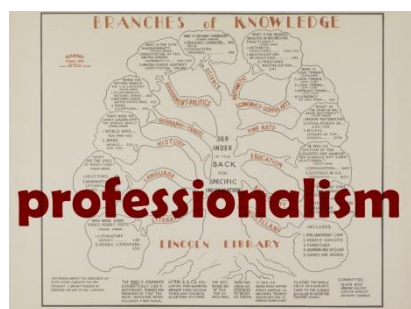

How do we support preservation in an environment in which rights holders and distributors can censor, alter, and withhold information? To what extent should we collaborate with other cultural institutions to preserve non-academic and born-digital culture? How can we stay on top of and influence the legal framework for sharing and preserving cultural materials in a world in which laws are local but culture and capital are g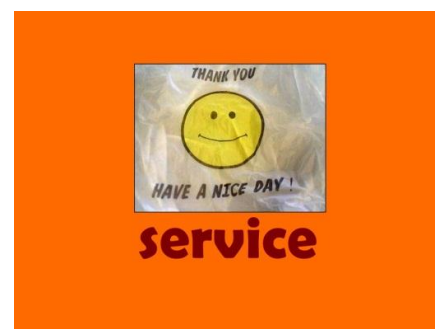lobal? And how do we negotiate the complexities of cultural appropriation and the right of marginalized people to have a say about these matters? There's nothing simple about this.

Now, that's a subversive notion when the dominant belief system is that the market decides what is good for us and that individual choice trumps collective welfare. We supposedly live in a meritocracy where CEOs work 300 times harder than their employees. nearly all of the smart entrepreneurs who attract venture capital are, coincidentally, male, and that one tenth of one percent of Americans deserve to have 40 percent of the nation's wealth because of they're just so much smarter and diligent than the rest of us. What can librarians do to promote the very idea that there is such a thing as the public good?

What exactly does this mean? One relatively easy answer is to say "we are people who have shared values and fight hard for them." But doing that, it turns out, is complicated. And service is a good example of why it's complicated. We tend to interpret this to mean "sure, we'll get that for you right away, even if in the long run it's like taking out a payday loan."

See what I mean? It's crazy complicated. How do we balance our kneejerk impulse to service with a smile with the need to serve in a socially responsible way that benefits the public good? When should we say "no" to our users in order to hold out for a sustainable and shareable future for knowledge? How can we merge our service ethic with professional leadership so that we can participate in creating a more just and equal society that also reflects our commitment to collective and democratic decision-making?

I believe in these values and think they can become a consistent guide for all of us. If we are willing to be reflective about them and act on them, we will pose a radical alternative to the market fundamentalism, libertarian individualism, and technocratic triumphalism that is causing so much damage to the world. We need to find practical ways to balance the immediate needs of the people who come into our libraries today while being activists on behalf of the long-term public good of all people, not just those who use our libraries today. It's a challenge worth the effort.

The way we think about what our purpose on a day-to-day basis shapes what we do and which of these values takes precedence. Last spring, I took a random sample of library mission statements to see what they have to say, and one thing I noticed is that they tend to use passive verbs, verbs like "support" and "serve. - my library's mission statement is no exception. If you put them into a word cloud. You'll see what rises to the top. "Provide" is a triumph of consumerism.

According to Ithaka S&R faculty surveys conducted every few years for over a decade, the most important function of the library has always been "to pay for the resources I need." The library's primary function, to support individual productivity, grew ever more important for faculty between 2003 and 2009. Interestingly, in 2012, it fell off a bit – irrelevance alert! Are libraries losing market share now that we can haz pdf? Even with that drop off, paying for stuff was still believed the most important thing libraries did by far. A survey of library directors showed that they put student learning ahead of faculty wants. Providing stuff is shrinking, too, except in research libraries, but it still makes the list of our top priorities even though we know the rent we're paying is too damn high.
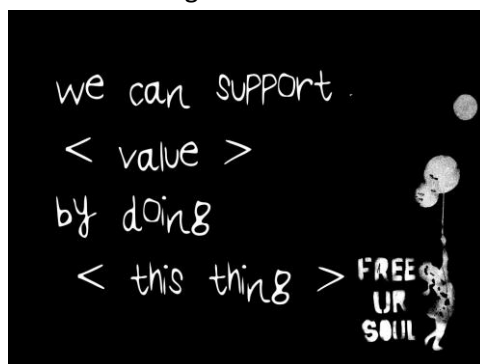
But another world is possible. Cory Doctorow gave a stirring speech about "GLAM and the Free World," urging cultural institutions to shape our technological future. "We are presently building the electronic nervous system of the modern world . . . We dwellers on the electronic frontier have it on our power to establish the norms, laws and practices that will echo through the ages to come." We have that power, but instead we outsource it to vendors for a limited time only.

We need to help people discover and connect to their chosen networks and we need to think about how to create a *free and fair infrastructure* for these networks. The only way we will be able to do that is if we stop thinking of ourselves as providers of stuff to a narrowly-defined local community and trainers of students who will lose access to it when they graduate. We need to put our infrastructure and our efforts where our values are.

So, what I'd like to do now is discuss how we can do this together, because this is hard and I don't have the answers. Collectively, though, I think we have more power than we realize. So what I would like you to form small groups – turn to your neighbor, make sure nobody gets left out – and do the following.

- Choose one of the values that particularly interests you.
- Discuss why it matters – not just for libraries, but for everyone.
- Think about one thing we could do to support that value in our library work.
- Think about a way that we could support that value outside the library.
- Think about how to have fun while doing this – because fun is subversive, too.

These can be small, practical things. They can be wild, crazy, giant ideas. Just for now, let's not focus on the structural impediments that get in the way of our imaginations. Then – the hard part. See if you can fill in the blanks, and then we'll do some sharing of ideas.

Final thoughts.

As we do this work, as we defend our most important values, we need to remember they are shared, they are bigger than our buildings, bigger than our profession. We don't have to worry about market share. What we have to share is a set of values that is inexhaustible. Thomas Jefferson said that's how ideas work.

> If nature has made any one thing less susceptible than
> all others of exclusive property, it is the action of the thinking
> power of an idea . . . He who receives an idea from me,
> receives instruction himself without lessing mine; as he
> who lights his taper at mine receives light without darkening
> me. That ideas should freely spread from one to another
> over the globe, for the moral and mutual Instruction of man,
> and improvement of his condition, seems to have been
> peculiarly and benevolently designed by nature . . .
> incapable of confinement or exclusive appropriation.
>
> Thomas Jefferson

I also really like a passage from Cindy Crabb who has written some brilliant zines that refuse to be cynical but also refuse to oversimplify hard, complicated things. Critic Alison Piepmeier talks about how Crabb finds ways to live true to her values using micropolitical pedagogies of hope."

Do you believe in happy endings?
Because sometimes they do happen.

Something inside shifts, something outside
comes together, and your fight becomes
more purposeful, your rest becomes
more restful, your hurt becomes something
you can bear and your happiness becomes
something that shines out with ease,
not in lightning manic bursts that fill
and then drain you, but something else,
something steady, something you can
almost trust to stay there.   cindy crabb

We need to nurture hope in ourselves and in the world. To wrap this up, I want to close with something that Bethany Nowviskie once said that continues to encourage me.

existential threats don't scare us . . . we're librarians!

Credits

Images
Free ur soul – Miguel Librero
Women in the Civic Library, Newcastle – State Library of New South Wales
Girl blowing heart bubbles – gilliannb
Padlock – walknboston
Security camera – David Drexler
Democracy street art – Jon Starbuck
Woman with bike reading – Mario Mancuso
Preserves – Panda Evans
Edinburgh Public Library – Alice
Poster of branches of knowledge – char booth
Have a nice day - Alex Headrick
Hong Kong protesters in the rain – Justin Jim

Typefaces
Defused by Vinz
California by Miles Hamilton
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