

Babel Fish Bouillabaisse II

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Introduction

In 2015 while on sabbatical, I assembled some of my blog post and articles into [Babel Fish Bouillabaisse](#), an open access anthology, using [PressBooks](#). At the time I was experimenting with public scholarship by blogging about my research into online book discussion communities while exploring the potential for using new platforms for open access scholarship.

A few years later, Minitex, which supports libraries in Minnesota and the Dakotas, [made PressBooks available](#) to the public through libraries. By then, I had added digital humanities to my librarian portfolio, so I used the platform to help a retired faculty member bring [some](#) of his [writings](#) to the public. I also was developing a new course, so adapted Mike Caulfield's [Web Literacy for Student Fact-Checkers](#) into an open access textbook – [Clickbait, Bias, and Propaganda in Information Networks](#) – along with my co-instructor, Rachel Flynn, and our students, who contributed chapters. I began to think it was time throw together another anthology of my own, which turned out to be good advanced planning when my 10-year blogging gig with *Inside Higher Ed* came to an end after 492 posts – something over 350,000 words about libraries, learning, technology and society.

My blogging goes back further. I remember the day (though I'm not certain of the year) when a student, who is now a seasoned librarian himself, introduced me to this new thing he was excited about. I was chatting with him at the reference desk, and he politely asked to borrow my keyboard and brought up Blogger to demonstrate how easy it was – much easier than my kludgy attempts to put library news on our site using raw html. I was hooked.

I began to assign blog posts as writing assignments in courses starting in 2005. That year, I also began a blog for my library and become one the inaugural contributors to the [Association of College and Research Libraries blog](#), which is still going strong (though I stepped away from it in 2011). Between 2009 –2015 I wrote a weekly column for *Library Journal* (in disappearing e-ink, as the links have all broken) and began blogging weekly for *Inside Higher Ed* in 2010. In future, I'll return to [blogging at my own site](#), though on a more relaxed and ad hoc schedule because having no deadlines will do that to a person.

A lot happened in libraries, technology, and society in my decade of blogging for IHE. Open access to scholarly publishing went from something

only activists knew much about to a significant part of the scholarly publishing environment. [Lever Press](#), which I helped to [brainstorm into existence](#), has an entire catalog of open access books published, with more in development. The [Google Books lawsuits](#) were resolved, the [GSU e-reserves lawsuits](#) were not. Wall Street was occupied and [had its own library](#) until the police tossed it into dumpsters. [We lost Aaron Swartz](#). Edward Snowden [blew the whistle](#). Net neutrality was rescued, but then [deregulated out of existence](#), though the fight isn't over. [Social media](#) became increasingly [anti-social](#). The news industry continued to struggle, with [half](#) of newspaper journalists pink-slipped over the decade.

Librarians retired a set of standards for information literacy in favor of [a more complex framework](#) after much debate. [Students struggled](#) with research papers. Librarians [struggled to help](#). Project Information Literacy released [one fascinating report](#) after [another](#), and after fan-girling for a decade I was tickled to be invited to serve as their first Scholar-in-Residence, to help with [a project](#) that is close to my heart. And I had the chance to work out my thoughts in writing, every week.

I've assembled some of those blog posts here, along with articles and the text of talks I've given since 2015, into a second helping of Babel Fish Bouillabaisse. *Bon appétit*.

LIBRARIES AND LEARNING

How I Became a Librarian

May 30, 2019

As the year finishes and the library becomes quiet, I find myself thinking about how I became a librarian.

It wasn't a well-planned career move. When I was in college I fell in love with a major that let me read big fat novels for credit. As I neared graduation, I bristled when my mother suggested, "why don't you go to library school?" As a child of the Great Depression she had a practical bent, and she knew my chosen major wouldn't be able to support me in a long-term relationship. "Something to fall back on," she added, which only made it worse. I loved being in libraries, I even worked in one, but it was the life of the mind that swept me off my feet. The kind of work I imagined librarians did – safe, boring, routine – nope, not for me. I had dreams.

I followed my love to graduate school where things changed. My beloved turned cruel and abusive. I was an ignoramus among the French critics who were big that year, and public displays of affection for literature were met with rolled eyes. *How embarrassing. What are you even doing here?* Within a semester I realized there would be endless arguments about money and daily reminders I couldn't possibly measure up. I dried my eyes and walked across campus to what was then called the School of Library Science, (renamed the School of Library and Information Science by the time I graduated, to my dismay), signed some documents to make the divorce official, and retraced my steps to tell my previous advisor it was over.

He closed his office door and poured me a glass of sherry. (Seriously. He kept a decanter of sherry in a cabinet for emergencies.) Leaning forward on his tweed elbows, he told me solemnly, "working in a library isn't like *working* in a library." Warning me I was signing up for a life of drudgery, pushing book carts around the stacks like the nameless women pushing laundry carts he passed in hotel hallways when he traveled to exotic locations to deliver important papers about those snooty theorists who hadn't even tried to make friends with me.

I sometimes like to imagine traveling back in time to give him an education (or maybe a punch in the nose – or both). He believed a well-stocked library was his due because his work mattered. The women whose imagination and

labor and belief in the public good who created those libraries for him – their work had no value at all.

To be fair, I didn't really know what librarians did or cared about, either. I just knew that as soon as I walked through the doors of the library school I felt a sense of relief. Showing off? Not required. Nobody would ever pause when referring to Derrida to say “you *have* read Derrida, haven't you?” knowing perfectly well I hadn't, a standard hazing ritual. The halls didn't reek of desperation masked by too much intellectual cologne. (It didn't occur to me until years later my previous advisor was as scared as his students, desperate to hold a failing program together with big words and civilized beverages.)

My relief soon turned into something else. Librarians, it turned out, were *all about* ideas. They talked about social justice and intellectual freedom and information ethics. They made things for people, not just for themselves. They could be deeply serious, yet poke fun at their own image. Best of all, librarians were allowed to knit together interdisciplinary knowledge, freely making the kind of connections I loved as an undergraduate. My previous graduate program would not have approved. Knitting was not for serious scholars.

You might notice a gender theme, here. Knitting. Buns. Mindless clerical work. That's not an accident. My previous advisor assumed library work was beneath my potential (as did I, when my mother suggested it). It was *women's work*, so of course it couldn't be interesting or valuable. Taking care of other people was for suckers.

Back when I was infatuated with my major but had a side gig to pay tuition, my boss ran the university's music library, and she made things work without bragging about it. She fielded imperious demands from male faculty who would later crash into her office, distraught, looking for tea and sympathy – literally. My former advisor served sherry and lectured, my librarian boss plugged in the kettle and listened. When the men finished pouring out their woes and left, she'd roll her eyes and we'd laugh. These guys. So self-important. So needy.

My former advisor was building walls of prestige, trying to protect his program and his reputation. My boss in the library was opening the doors and building community.

As a child of the depression and the oldest of nine children, my mother never had a chance to finish high school. Her father had died and there were mouths to feed. You could say “what a shame, she never had a chance to

finish her education,” and that true, but it wasn’t a shame. She never finished her education because she never stopped going to the library. My father, a busy professor at a research university, admitted she was the educated one. No joke. She knew the date and the context of every major historical event. She could tell you the meaning of Latin phrases and the names of every tree and flower we’d see in the woods. She could have told us how to spell it, whatever it was, but she always made us look it up ourselves. I’m not sure if she knew what librarians actually did, but she knew how important libraries were to her when, at sixteen, she had to find a job and a way to keep learning on her own.

So now I’m a librarian.

Thursday in the Park With Students

October 6, 2015

It's always inspiring to learn about new research from scholars who share their discoveries with excitement and passion at the best conferences. I had this experience last week. What was unusual was that the researchers were students just a few weeks into their first college semester. And the venue was a great urban park.

As part of a visit to the University of San Francisco, I joined a class being taught by David Silver, who I've known for years but had never actually met. He's [teaching](#) a first year seminar about the Golden Gate Park, which is conveniently close to the campus, a great field site and living textbook.

On the day I joined the class we met at the site of the [1894 Midwinter Fair](#). This was a Californian version of the Chicago World's Columbian Exposition (though, so far as I know, without any [serial killers](#) – though there was a man-eating lion that actually killed a man during the event). There are traces of this event in the landscape of the park. Students had picked something at the fair that aligned with their interests and came to class that day ready with a three-minute presentation on what they'd found out about their chosen subject: the hospital for people injured at the fair that also showed off new surgical techniques, disputes with the local Japanese-American community about how Japan was depicted in an exhibit, the entrepreneur who gathered up people from West African countries to populate an imitation “African village,” the way the press covered the man-eating lion (in a word, luridly), and so forth. It was a great variety of topics, illustrated with photographs and accounts from the time found in digital collections online and in books from the library.

Giving the first public speech of your college career can be nerve-racking, particularly when it's in a public place where wandering tourists stop by to listen in, but these students quickly relaxed into a collaborative pooling of what they'd uncovered and the questions that emerged. Students began to ask if they could go next, because their research fit so well with what the last presenter had uncovered. Questions were kicked around, connections were made, and an impromptu plan to spend a Saturday at a

nearby archives that held historical documents about the fair was quickly negotiated and unanimously approved. It was utterly fascinating and super-impressive, and left me thinking about what makes research so much fun for students just getting started – or (as is unfortunately much more common) so very onerous.

Why was this experience so great? Were they just unusually brilliant students? They clearly were pretty special – but I think there are some valuable lessons to take away from this class for students of all abilities.

- They were clear about what research is for. David Silver made developing curiosity the focus of their first class meetings. Students had practiced it. They knew how to wonder and speculate. They knew that the point wasn't having the right answers, it was conjuring up intriguing questions that may or may not have answers. Taking risks was encouraged, which is huge for students accustomed to a test-driven mark-the-right-answer educational system.
- The focus wasn't on following rules or procedures. Nobody told them what kind of sources they should use, or how many, or where they should look, or how to document them. Nobody told them they have to search differently now that they are in college, relying only a certain kind of source. Yet the quality and variety of materials they'd found was amazing. Their genuine curiosity made them want to keep digging, and sometimes pivot to pursue an unexpected lead. One student figured out how to track down the elusive perfect chapter in a book on a broader topic that included information about the fair – something you couldn't tell except by making a reasoned guess and going to the shelves. These students may not know yet what external features identify a source as scholarly, but they didn't have to – they were practicing authentic scholarship themselves.
- Students had independently found interesting things to talk about, but during the class they were invested in creating a shared understanding. There was no sense of competition, but rather a great interest in finding out how things connected. Another fascinating thing emerged: as the class proceeded they began to probe beneath the facts, raising bigger questions about labor policies and public relations and the ethics of having human beings from another culture displayed in what one student called a "petting zoo." They speculated about the economic motives of displaying California's agriculture and industry and what it

meant that it was so very hard to find out who, exactly, had been killed by the man-eating lion. What might have been an assembly of facts had become a conversation about the whole context and meaning of the fair, a snowballing series of questions that nobody, not even the teacher, had yet answered.

- They were not just sharing ideas with one another, they had learned something about the conventions and style of Wikipedia and were preparing to add more material and documentation to the Wikipedia page about the fair. Why uncover fascinating information and painstakingly document sources just for your teacher when you can share it with the world?

It was a really impressive class, and I realized later that it practiced five important things emphasized by the group that had invited me, a faculty learning community focused on information literacy in the first year. This interdisciplinary group of faculty and librarians looked at various definitions and discussions of information literacy and together determined which elements are most important to them. In brief they are:

- Curiosity should drive the research process.
- Authentic assignments can cultivate true information literacy.
- Authority is constructed and contextual.
- Scholarship is a conversation.
- We should foster inquiry as a lifelong process.

It was incredibly exciting to see in practice exactly what those things look like when a group of students seems so totally engaged. When it comes to lifelong learning, they're off to a great start.

Thanks to the students for sharing their discoveries with a visitor, and to David for inviting me and taking the photo of us gathered at the feet of Francis Scott Key. If you're curious about the Midwinter Fair, you can check out the [Wikipedia page](#) – but if you wait a week or so you'll find quite a lot more content there, thanks to these dogged young scholars.

My Take on the Amazon Workplace Exposé

August 18, 2015

Both [Matt Reed](#) and [Joshua Kim](#) have written here about [The New York Times's exposé](#) of Amazon's work culture, and I can't resist joining them. Dean Dan looked at the issue of "transparency" at work and why that seemingly positive virtue can be problematic. There's an interesting *Harvard Business Review* [article](#) that bears on this, too. (Caught reading HBR – you got me, Steven Bell!) Zeynep Tufekci has [also written](#) about the way seeming transparency is often paired with corporate opacity. Transparency and openness have their dark sides, as Audrey Watters [can tell you](#). Joshua asked why academics find the article so chilling. Are there lessons we can take from Amazon's capacity to be "open, agile, and data driven" without losing our values? How much do we want to be like Amazon? Can we do it without being like Amazon? Or, as he puts in in his teaser, "Is this really what we need to do to increase our productivity?" (I think by "productivity" he means "do good work," but I could be wrong.)

What strikes me most from the perspective of an academic librarian is that this article is basically the story of contemporary tech capitalism, which has had enormous influence on library culture and higher ed. Short version: we hire the best, you'll love your work so much that your life will be devoted to being the best you can be, and we'll use data to make sure our customers get the best experience possible at scale. Moar productivity! Or, if you must be cynical, we'll screen out people who aren't like us, we'll only retain workers who don't have elderly parents, children, ailments, or anything else in their lives that will interfere with a 24/7 devotion to labor, and we will put them under continual surveillance to keep them onto their toes. But it will be so much fun working with cool, smart people! And you'll be part of the future, yay! We love our customers so much that we will spy on them. It's for their sake that we'll spy on you, too, and demand detailed metrics to prove you're doing your job. We don't have to have profits now – this is an investment in a glorious future. Resistance is not only futile, it's embarrassing. Dude, you're showing your age.

So faculty must publish more and gather metrics to prove that they're

not only producing more but in the right places using impact factors, which should never be used to evaluate the value of an article, but hey, it's a number! It must be true! The anxiety level is ratcheted up as only select faculty from the right programs get prestigious jobs and most teaching is contracted out to underpaid independent creatives. That's why you don't get an office. They are only for our star employees, all six of them. New journals have to be launched to handle the overflow of perishable publications, but no problem, we'll just send the bill to libraries. When that well runs dry, we'll have authors build the cost into their grants because tax-supported capitalism is a great investment in our national competitiveness. Libraries can be retrofitted to drive customer satisfaction, er, student success by housing student services in the library (one stop shopping!) and librarians will analyze all the data exhaust from websites and databases to link library use to GPAs. If we do our job right, the administration might show us mercy and we can escape the scythe of irrelevance until next year.

Snarky? I'll stipulate to that.

Amazon is simply a highly visible exemplar of a philosophy that emphasizes individuality, ubiquitous surveillance through data-mining, a belief that competition is the natural order of things, that enabling the consuming of things as quickly and as cheaply as possible is our highest calling, that there is no such thing as enough productivity, and that a handful of visionary leaders understand this and we should either be one of them or should at least fall in line. Librarians say we value privacy, but now we routinely send information from use of their webpages to Google because Google Analytics is free and awesome and [Piwik](#) is free and hard, or so we've heard. We know we can't make our search as easy as Google, but we'll spend tens of thousands of dollars and several FTE trying. We used to value values, but now we spend our time measuring value in monetary terms for self-defense. We help retention! Tuition-payers are correlated with library use! Shutting us down would hurt the bottom line. We have numbers!

This is nothing new. Librarians have always looked to business for leadership lessons. Way back in 1897 John Cotton Dana urged libraries to be more like factories, offices, and laboratories rather than temples, cathedrals or "mortuary piles." He argued for open stacks to follow the contemporary shift in retail shopping experiences: people enjoyed touching the goods themselves and making choices without a middleman. (See Abigail Van Slyck's [Free to All](#) for the fascinating details.) Our drive to be more like Google and Amazon is simply the latest instance of trying to apply lesson

from commerce to our day-to-day work. Open stacks is a good idea. Trying to figure out what works on our websites is a good idea, too.

But so many of the fundamental values embedded in the business practices of tech giants whose platforms have become fundamental to the exchange of information today are hostile to [library values](#) which include access for all, social responsibility, democracy, diversity, lifelong learning, the preservation of culture, the public good, privacy, and intellectual freedom. Yes, service is also a library value. But service based on our values is not the same as delivering consumer goods more quickly and cheaply than the competition. The more we conflate consumerism with service for the public good, the harder it will be for public institutions like libraries and universities to do their essential work.

Doing Our Copyright Homework

September 20, 2015

When I started library school many years ago, I didn't realize I would be thinking about copyright on a regular basis. Oh, we posted a copyright notice over every photocopier warning library users to avoid violating the law, but questions about whether something was legal or not came up relatively infrequently in the first decade of my professional life. The internet changed all that because it changed the way we share scholarship. Now, copyright law intersects with our everyday practice as librarians, teachers, and scholars, and keeping up with legal interpretations is part of our work.

Of course, not everyone wants to bother with legal ambiguities. People avoid copyright issues by being over-cautious, letting corporations and their proxies tell us what we're allowed to do or by adopting convenient work-arounds that aren't always legal but feel natural in a connected world. But ignoring the role copyright plays in our lives and its constant evolution is problematic because we're implicated.

Here's an example of a court case that will likely become part of how I think about copyright. Last week, the Ninth Circuit court [handed down a decision](#) in a case that first made news in 2007. A woman made [a video](#) of her baby, happily bouncing to a tune on the radio playing faintly in the background. She put it on YouTube so that she could send the link to friends and family. A lot of people found it irresistibly cute, though I very much doubt any of them thought it was a substitute for buying a recording of Prince's "Let's Go Crazy." Universal issued a take-down notice to YouTube, saying it violated Prince's copyright (and the corporation's financial interest in that copyright). The mother, with the help of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, argued that it was clearly a fair use. Eight years and multiple motions later, the court has ruled in her favor.

There are two significant things about this opinion that pertain to the kinds of fair-use decisions academics have to make constantly. First, [as Kevin Smith emphasizes](#), fair use is not simply an affirmative defense, it is a right. The court says so definitively. Second, owners of intellectual property must consider whether a use is fair before issuing a take-down notice. This is a fair use win.

However, [as Sarah Jeong notes](#), the decision isn't a slam-dunk victory. The court has ruled that rights holders and their proxies are responsible for wrongfully issuing a take-down notice – but they can be held responsible only if they knew they were in error. In 2007, a human being made that judgment call. Now these alleged copyright violations are sought out by robots, not humans applying a complex set of factors to a particular instance. It would be quite difficult for a litigant to prove a robot's malicious intent, and there aren't many people willing to spend years trying to assert their legal rights against the workings of algorithmic judgment.

All that said, this is one of a long series of court cases that firm up the notion that fair use is a right, and even though it can be difficult to exercise it in an era where algorithms make the decisions, it's one that we should exercise in order to preserve the public good. Too often, copyright is seen as a simple property right, when in fact it's a limited monopoly granted by the government in order to balance creators' incentives with the advancement of knowledge and creativity. Big money interests have managed to tilt the statutes toward rights holders and against the public interest, but lately case law has remind us that the public has rights, too.

I'm thinking about this while also mulling over the fact that, once again, one of the five giant commercial publishers who own the copyright to half or more of our current published scholarship [has been caught selling open access articles fraudulently](#). Did the publisher act illegally? No – the articles were [published under a generous Creative Commons license](#), the authors deliberately inviting reuse because reuse is helpful for advancing knowledge. But for a major scholarly publisher to take articles that the authors made open access and sell them to unsuspecting researchers and the librarians who serve them is underhanded and scuzzy. And it's [happened before](#).



Ross Mounce @rmounce · 6h

I caught Wiley selling my open access article. So they unpaywalled it. But what about the rest? They shld all be OA

/10.1002/bult.172.v39n4/issueoc#group4

Special Section: What, Why And Where? Jump to...

	Introduction altmetrics: What, why and where? (pages 8-9) Heather Piwowar Article first published online: 15 APR 2013 DOI: 10.1002/bult.2013.1720390404 Abstract Full Article (HTML) Enhanced Article (HTML) PDF(86K) Request Permissions	\$38 *
	The power of altmetrics on a CV (pages 10-13) Heather Piwowar and Jason Priem Article first published online: 15 APR 2013 DOI: 10.1002/bult.2013.1720390405 Abstract Full Article (HTML) Enhanced Article (HTML) PDF(94K) Request Permissions	\$38 *
	Open access and altmetrics: Distinct but complementary (pages 14-17) Ross Mounce Article first published online: 15 APR 2013 DOI: 10.1002/bult.2013.1720390406 Abstract Full Article (HTML) Enhanced Article (HTML) PDF(164K) References Request Permissions	free, because I complained!
	Ask not what altmetrics can do for you, but what altmetrics can do for developing countries (pages 18-21) Juan Pablo Alperin Article first published online: 15 APR 2013 DOI: 10.1002/bult.2013.1720390407 Abstract Full Article (HTML) Enhanced Article (HTML) PDF(165K) References Request Permissions	\$38 * * plus tax
	New opportunities for repositories in the age of altmetrics (pages 22-26) Stacy Koniksel and Dave Scherer Article first published online: 15 APR 2013 DOI: 10.1002/bult.2013.1720390408 Abstract Full Article (HTML) Enhanced Article (HTML) PDF(225K) References Request Permissions	\$38 * These should ALL be open access (CC BY).
	The many faces of article-level metrics (pages 27-30) Jennifer Lin and Martin Fenner	\$38 *

I doubt that putting a price tag on these open access articles was deliberate. Like the robot-driven take-down notices, Wiley and other giant publishers have made ingesting articles into its massive database so routine that it can't handle the subtleties of copyright or accommodate oddities like authors (with the blessing of their scholarly society) asserting rights authors normally give away with little thought. The system is built that way. Asserting your rights takes work. It goes against the system.

The more we accept routines that lock up intellectual property without question, the fewer rights we'll have. This is why we all need to keep up with copyright. Our ability to share knowledge for teaching and research and for the greater good depends on it.

Open Access Without Tears

October 8, 2015

Let's say you're an academic who needs to develop a record of scholarship, either because you are up for tenure, you hope someday to be in a secure academic job, or you need to bring in grant dollars to support the research you do.

Or we could just say you're an academic.

Let's also say you've wondered whether your work will ever make an impact when the list price for your article in a Google search is \$37.50 or the book you published about poverty is being sold at the astonishing price of \$145 and you aren't sure why it costs so much. And let's say you once had a library account at a research university but now you're between jobs and your library ID just stopped working and you're beginning to wonder how long before your friends get weary of sending you PDFs.

Or we could just say you're an academic. The majority of academics aren't in tenured jobs at R1 institutions.

Is there any way to do things differently without compromising quality and without threatening your future? You've seen debates on Twitter, where some folks get so passionate about open access it's kind of scary. You also keep seeing articles about "predatory" publishers who charge money to be published in journals that are bogus, and that's scary, too. Is there a way to do good, respected research and still make it available to anyone in the world who wants to read it?

Actually, yes, in many cases. And it's not necessarily that hard, though it does add extra steps and can require a bit of research up front.

Open Access Journals There are journals that anyone can read for free that don't require a fee from the author to publish. Some of them are highly respected though few of them have the long histories to carry the prestige that the big-name journals have. An exception is [Cultural Anthropology](#), a flagship society journal that has gone open access and is trying to develop and maintain a new funding model to keep it open. My profession's major journal, [College and Research Libraries](#), has also taken the leap and even the back issues are digitized and freely available, which is awesomely great when you want to share something with others by linking to it. Ask around; keep an eye out. There may be a brash new open access kid on the block that

someday will have the name recognition that journals established in the print era have. You can explore the [Directory of Open Access Journals'](#) subject lists, but people in your discipline who care about this stuff may be better guides to newly emerging reputations.

If you are working in a field where grant money can cover costs of publishing (and where funders increasingly expect public access to the work they fund), there are likely valuable open access options that cover their operation costs through author-side fees. Again, find out from colleagues which ones are most worthwhile. It's fairly obvious to anyone who looks closely that some so-called journals are actually opportunistic scams; they publish journals in dozens of disciplines, they haven't actually published many articles, they have generic titles that you've never heard of, they sponsor expensive conferences in exotic tourist locations, they promise to have your article reviewed and published within a completely unrealistic timeframe. No question that those are fraudulent. There are also "respectable" scams – journals that charge subscriptions but will, for several thousand dollars, make your article open access. This so-called "hybrid" approach is expensive and hard to justify, given the publisher is getting paid two ways for the same journal and is making a better profit margin than most hedge-fund managers.

But there are a number of reputable publishers developing new open publishing platforms. Perhaps the best known is [PLOS](#) (the Public Library of Science) which has been around since 2001. Though the author [fees](#) for some of these journals may seem high, the publisher offers options for non-funded scholars. Alternatively, your institution (perhaps through your library) can help cover author-side fees. A just-launched enterprise is the [Open Library of Humanities](#), which is funded not by authors (humanities scholars rarely get grants that cover publication costs), but by libraries around the world that want to make scholarship more widely available in a sustainable manner. While it's too new to have a long-established reputation, it is a well-thought-out alternative to business as usual.

So many scholars are concerned about the growing power and profits of [five multinational corporations which own most of our journals](#), they are willing to try new things. Timothy Gower, a mathematician who received his discipline's highest honor, has [just helped to found a new journal](#), *Discrete Analysis*, which will operate exactly like a traditional journal except that it will be free to all and will reside on [arXiv](#), a research-sharing platform that's older than the web, with a little help from a company that will help handle

submissions. At the start, the whole thing is free, thanks to soft startup funding, but when that runs out the most authors will pay is the cost of a couple of beers to cover the publication's modest expenses. Compare that to the \$3,000 – \$5,000 that established publishers charge to make an article open access.

Self-Archiving This is the hidden gem for scholars in fields where prestige is still locked up in journals that are not open access and the new options don't quite meet your needs. Most traditional subscription-based journals will allow you to post a version of your article online, either a draft before peer review, a finished copy in manuscript form, or even the final PDF. You can check in advance by searching the [SHERPA/RoMEO database](#). If the journal you're most interested in doesn't offer a self-archiving option or isn't listed in the database, contact the editor. You may be able to negotiate an opportunity to post a version online. If you'd like some contract language, the [SPARC addendum](#) is a model document you can use. It's best to check well before you submit, because you usually find out what rights the publisher demands just as your article is nearly ready to be published, when it's too late.

What if putting articles online is not something you've ever done before? Chances are your institution will do it for you. Many academic libraries have an institutional repository and will be delighted to put your article up for you. If your library doesn't have a repository, or you're not a long-time affiliate of any particular institution, you can post your things at [OpenDepot.org](#) or a [disciplinary repository](#). Many scholars create profiles and post their stuff at [ResearchGate](#) or [Academia.edu](#). These are social networks for scientists and academics and make it possible to upload papers, but they are for-profit companies that require creating accounts and I've never quite figured out what their business model is, which always makes me wonder what kind of "free" we're talking about. Bottom line, there are multiple ways to make your research freely available online even if it's published traditionally, though perhaps not in its final published version.

What about Books? For many fields, books remain the gold standard, and while [some open access options are available](#), it's less common than for journals. There are high costs associated with the editorial and other work involved in turning a manuscript into a book, and while there are any number of self-publishing options today, it's usually the expensive work done by humans other than the author that lends a book both quality and name-brand prestige. But doesn't it break your heart a little when a book

you worked so hard on is read by so few? Libraries aren't buying them in the numbers they once did, and distribution through bookish channels (other than by the Everything Store) is iffy, though exposure is a benefit of publishing with a good university press. Edited volumes are another beast – sometimes you can post a version of your chapter online, but it all depends on the publication agreement. Ask for it before you agree to contribute.

Is there a way to share some of the knowledge that's in your book with the world even if it's too expensive for most people (including precarious academics like yourself) to purchase? There's nothing to stop you from pulling some of the ideas out of your book and making them accessible to non-specialists while also giving your book a little extra exposure. It costs nothing to start a WordPress.com blog, though you do have to spend a bit if you don't want ads to appear on it. (That's how they support the service.) You could try [Medium](https://Medium.com), which is easy to use and attractive, though again the lack of a visible means of support makes me wonder how long it will be around. And there is also [Humanities Commons](https://HumanitiesCommons.org) – free hosting for a blog along with other scholarly networking options.

What if you're just noodling around an idea for a book? Writing about your ideas online and sharing them with those who might be interested won't harm your chances of getting a book proposal accepted. In fact, it may help. Doug Armato of the University of Minnesota Press has a phrase for this: [serial scholarship](#). Books don't arise out of nothing; there are usually conference papers, articles, and informal debates that come first. By testing ideas publicly, you can share links through Listservs, Twitter, Facebook, or your digital water cooler of choice, and it might eventually lead to interest from a press.

In the Final Analysis There are studies that says making your scholarship open access will increase its visibility and the chances it will be cited. That's nice – but that's not why I personally am committed to open access. I just think scholarship is worth sharing, and it's a shame to limit its potential audience to those who are in a position to pay or have affiliation with an institution that can pay on their behalf.

The Library of Forking Paths

October 15, 2015

In the late 1990s, we had to produce a strategic plan for our library. At that time, the card catalog had been gone for about ten years, replaced by a command-based electronic one, and then by a web-based catalog. We had some databases and electronic journals, and we knew we'd have more and could tell that the costs were going to rise. We had a website, but there wasn't much to it, and our resource guides were on paper. In our plan, we were contemplating how we would explain how information works to students as the landscape was in such a state of flux between two worlds: print and electronic.

In the late 2000s, we had to write another strategic plan for the library. While technology wasn't the focus of the plan, because it was so ubiquitous, we were still figuring out changes in the landscape. We wanted to acquire a platform for digital archives and start an institutional repository. We needed to think ahead to how we would support the creation, preservation, and use of new kinds of information: digital humanities projects, GIS, data sets, and so forth. We needed to get organized to support open access to the record of knowledge.

So we went from two worlds – print and electronic – to three: print, subscription-based electronic resources, and open access scholarship. We wanted to help our community think about why scholarship should be available to all, even though it meant figuring out new publication models and processes for faculty as well as rethinking how we could help students navigate a world of scholarship that would be even more complex than we imagined in the late 1990s.

The good news is that the world has seen enormous progress made on open access to scholarship since we wrote our 2009 plan. Locally, we've made some progress, too. We have [a fund](#) to help our faculty publish in journals that rely on author fees as their business model, thanks to the generous support of our faculty development program. Our archivist has [digitized](#) a great deal of unique local material and we've started an [institutional repository](#) to showcase publicly-available research by our faculty; we'll soon be adding student work. We've selected and cataloged

open access books and made sure journal content from the [Directory of Open Access Journals](#) appears alongside subscription content and, with other liberal arts colleges, we've explored the feasibility of starting an [open access liberal arts press](#) (about which some news may be forthcoming yet this year). Though we haven't pushed for a campus-wide open access mandate, library faculty adopted [one of our own](#) in May 2009, as we were wrapping up yet another big round of cuts to subscriptions. It seemed appropriate, given the price increases we were seeing.

I'm thinking about these changes since our first strategic plan, realizing that no matter how much progress we make on open access to scholarly research, we are always going to have multiple paths to follow as we trace ideas in the scholarly record. We still buy books, because at this point our community finds printed ones useful and we find the cost and the rights we would have to give up to shift to ebooks unacceptable. We still get some periodicals in print because we can't afford the higher price of getting them electronically. This is true of *Nature* and *Science*, for example – we pay plenty, but we'd pay far more to subscribe electronically. We're always going to have to pay for the electronic content that is currently owned by corporations. Those copyrights were given away and authors aren't getting them back. We can hope some scholars will exercise whatever rights they have to self-archive versions of their work, but a lot of it will not be available to the world at large in my lifetime, or in my children's. We're looking at how we can support new methods of open access publication. Though these are free to readers, they're not without cost. It makes sense, it seems to me, for libraries to start devoting some of their budget and staff time to supporting these new, more equitable forms of publication even as we will continue to have to pay for content that is behind paywalls. We'll have to keep paying for that paywalled content for generations because copyright lasts that long.

All of which is to say open access is vital for carrying out the mission of libraries and the institutions they serve. We believe that knowledge is for the public good, not for private gain. It's time to act on those beliefs and do more to make scholarship accessible to all from here on out. But librarians will have to keep balancing the demands on our budgets and will for the foreseeable future be serving as guides to this garden of forking paths, some of them with tolls and some without.

Next week we'll celebrate [Open Access Week](#). We also will check in periodicals, catalog books, pay for subscriptions, explore new publishing

models, add thing to our institutional repository, and try to explain this complicated world to our students and to each other. Happy trails.

Checking Our Library Privilege

October 20, 2015

So, let's say I'm doing research on issues related to privilege and inequality. Google Scholar tells me there's a an article on stratification in higher education that's looks interesting. Here' another one on how postcolonial theory can inform resistance to neoliberalism in universities. And ooh, this looks really interesting: digital inequality and participation in the political process. How great that academics turn their methods and theories to solving the problem of inequality. Too bad most people won't be able to read these articles.

The first one, from a Taylor and Francis journal, would cost me \$40 if I weren't affiliated at an institution that will spend a lot of money, much of it from student tuition, to get it for me. Shame those students will graduate in so much debt. Hey, somebody could write a good article about that. The second, from a journal published by Oxford University Press: \$39.00. The third, from a Sage journal: \$30. But hey, the abstracts are free and these publishers offer information about the journals' impact factors, a variety of alternative metrics for each article, and a handy link so I can tell Twitter all about research that most people can't read.

Like most forms of privilege, those who have it often don't recognize it. It's sneaky that way. As Jason Baird Jackson pointed out back in 2012, scholars with access to the record of research are the [academic one percent](#). The first challenge is to recognize our privilege. The second is to examine what we do in our everyday lives that makes things unequal and work on fixing it.

There's good news on that front. A number of the articles that I found in my search had versions available for anyone to read thanks to authors taking the trouble to self-archive them. And there are more and more creative ways to create a new infrastructure for funding the sharing of research more equitably than by depending on institutional affiliation. Open access publishing is gaining ground, and the humanities and social sciences are finally catching up to the sciences on developing new models. Here is a sampling of recent developments.

[The Open Library of Humanities](#)* just launched after a period of smart, thorough planning. This platform is host to a number of established journals that wanted to become more equitably available as well as new ones. In

time books will be hosted, too. This project is adapted to the context of the humanities, where authors aren't assumed to have funding for their research to cover the costs of publishing it, as is more common in the sciences. The financial support required to run the platform is coming from library partners and funders such as [Mellon](#), which has been pouring resources into ways of rethinking scholarly publishing. The mission of the Library of Humanities is "to support and extend open access to scholarship in the humanities – for free, for everyone, for ever."

[Luminos](#), an open access imprint of the University of California, has launched its list with ten free-to-download books with more to come. These publications are funded by a combination of author-side support raised through grants or other funding and library memberships. It hasn't been unheard of for institutions to pay subventions to support the publication of books by their faculty. Now we can do this *and* ensure that the book isn't only available to a small, select, privileged audience.

[The Open Access Network](#) has looked at ways to develop a large-scale equitable way for institutions of all sizes and missions to share the cost of creating and sustaining the infrastructure for scholarly societies and university presses to make their works open access. This vision is a big-picture effort that is complementary to other open access projects rather than a stand-alone competitor for funds.

[A recently-released survey](#) suggests that scholars in the humanities and social sciences are increasingly open to open access publishing. Ironically, the survey was done by Nature and Palgrave, publishers of expensive books and journals. Or maybe it's not ironic – it's an indicator that open access is the future, and even for-profit publishers know it. Fittingly, the survey data has been [released on Figshare](#) under a Creative Commons license so you can do your own analysis.

My wish this [Open Access Week](#) is that we all examine our privilege and think about what it is we want to do in the world as scholars and librarians – and commit to changing the systems we're implicated in that makes knowledge available at high cost for the few for only as long as subscriptions are paid. We don't have to do it that way anymore.

The Fix Isn't In

March 3, 2016

By now, you've probably heard of Sci-Hub, a collection of millions of articles being gathered through borrowed or stolen library logins, then loaded onto servers abroad for anyone to download. The woman who started it has been called a modern-day [Robin Hood](#). Also, [a criminal](#). There has also been heated debate about [why librarians aren't doing more to back publishers in this fight](#). After all, these thieves are taking advantage of licensed scholarship that costs libraries billions of dollars annually! Surely we want to stop this rampant theft!

To which I'm tempted to respond "when did we sign on to become your guards, and when do we get a check for this labor?" Because it is labor – lots of labor – to maintain link resolvers, keep license agreements in order, and deal with constant changes in subscription contents. We have to work a lot harder to be publishers' border guards than people realize.

While this runs completely counter to our values, we really have no choice but to provide this free labor. Libraries run the risk of having their institutional access cut off if a publisher finds their institutional IP address is involved in a massive download. More troubling is the fact that stolen or leaked credentials can [seriously compromise](#) both network and individual security.

In other words, whatever you think of Sci-Hub, it's not the fix for the mess we're in.

So why are scholars using Sci-Hub? I can think of a couple of reasons: they may have no other access to these articles, not being affiliated with a well-funded first world library (the Robin Hood version) or because getting access is a hassle and hey, *I need those articles! Give me those articles right now!* For many folks, Sci-Hub is simply a more convenient library that doesn't make you mess around with logins and interlibrary loans. Hey, we're busy. Paywalls are a pain.

Librarians are in a nasty spot. Sometimes I wonder if we can even call ourselves librarians anymore. We feel we are virtually required to provide access to whatever researchers in our local community ask for while restricting access from anyone outside that narrowly-defined community of users. Instead of curators, we're personal shoppers who moonlight as border

guards. This isn't working out well for anyone. Unaffiliated researchers have to find illegal work-arounds, and faculty who actually have access through libraries are turning to the black market for articles because it seems more efficient than contacting their personal shopper, particularly when the library itself doesn't figure in their work flow. In the meantime, all that money we spend on big bundles of articles (or on purchasing access to articles one at a time when we can't afford the bundle anymore) is just a really high annual rent. We can't preserve what we don't own, and we don't curate because our function is to get what is asked for.

This is how to dig a grave for libraries as a common good.

I've been thinking about this while also mulling over [Scott McClemee's take](#) on the [Ithaka study](#) of how much it costs for a university press to publish a book. TL;DR – it costs a lot, not including the work of doing the research and writing it up. Though there's no profit margin like that of the big commercial journal publishers to factor in, those costs are built into the price of books because . . . well, publishers are supposed to make money, not lose it. So prices are high because each book is handcrafted artisanal scholarship. A few hundred copies of the average scholarly book enters the marketplace of ideas, where they might connect with an audience – or not. Libraries aren't a major market anymore because we're spending all of our money on articles. Yet for some reason we still insist on book-shaped badges for tenure and measure the worth of scholars in many fields by their publisher's brand.

This is how to dig a grave for knowledge as a common good. Spend a lot of money writing and publishing books that few people will have a chance to read.

It seems to me both issues raise some big questions we have to answer:

- What are we trying to do with our research?
- Who benefits?
- Who pays?
- How can all the parties involved get on the same page so that we can fix this mess?

The Skeuomorphic Library

March 10, 2016

I have students read Vannevar Bush's "[As We May Think](#)" every spring. Bush was a scientific bureaucrat who helped organize the work of the Manhattan Project. In 1945, just before the fruits of that project were used to destroy two Japanese cities, he published his thoughts about what scientists would do in peacetime, focusing in particular on the problem of managing a proliferation of information. He envisioned a desk-sized machine called the Memex that scientists could use to index, consult, and annotate scientific literature using a variety of developing technologies such as microfilm. On a more visionary note, he predicted computing, voice recognition, artificial intelligence, and hypertext. He didn't take into account how copyright and the way we fund scientific publishing restricts sharing and reuse, but hey, he couldn't guess everything right.

The part of the essay that always grabs me, though, is where he describes the mechanical mean of storing and retrieving information and how it cannot replace the way people actually think – through connections grasped on the fly. "Our ineptitude in getting at the record is largely caused by the artificiality of systems of indexing," he wrote. "The human mind does not work that way. It operates by association. With one item in its grasp, it snaps instantly to the next that is suggested by the association of thoughts, in accordance with some intricate web of trails carried by the cells of the brain." He imagined that we could improve upon the mechanized indexing of information by allowing scientists to create, record, and share trails of association, given automated access to the record.

In many ways, citations serve as hand-coded trails of association that we create and share, but we persist in presenting them traditionally – in text at the bottom of a page, or in an alphabetical list of references. The links are the opposite of hyper; learning how to read a citation and go from it to a source remains a huge challenge for undergraduates once they realize that fine print is actually good for something other than a kind of plagiarism liability insurance. Yet the web of citations (and the automated linking of citations through Google Scholar and Web of Science) are about as close as

we come to Bush's "trails of association." Hypertext is closer, but it hasn't replaced hand-coded references in the worlds of science and scholarship.

We've seen so much change in libraries, yet it's so hard to let go of the old ways.

Remember when we used to explain databases by saying "it's like the *Reader's Guide*, but on the computer"? Maybe you're not old enough. It's been more than a quarter of a century since students were likely to have actually seen the *Reader's Guide*, much less used it. Yet our databases are largely still structured like an old-school printed index, and we expect people to search much as they did when flipping pages of a printed index. We're now adding a discovery layer of software to make searching collections of databases more like searching Google, though that doesn't solve the problem of being overwhelmed with an abundance of choices before you're even sure you know what you're looking for. There are no trails to follow there.

Library catalogs have been online since the 1980s, but they still use a record format designed to automate the printing of catalog cards. All this is set to change, but deciding what exactly we can let go of when creating new cataloging practices is incredibly hard. Meanwhile, my students are completely unimpressed by the way Google girded their lawyers and digitized the contents of tens of millions of library books. They don't remember a world when it was impossible to search inside books from the comfort of your desktop. It's not the amazing "[moon shot](#)" it once was.

This week, when looking at our dwindling collection of paper-based periodicals and newspapers, most of them rarely used, my colleagues and I talked about showing students the difference between popular publications like *New Scientist* and science journals, or between a left-leaning magazine like *The Nation* and the right-leaning *National Review*. I had the sudden sense that all of this was a bit like using the *Reader's Guide* to explain databases. Many of our students have never read a magazine in print. Most of them get their news and commentary online, and always have.

Likewise, very few of them have ever encountered a scholarly article before that first term writing course in which they are told scholarly articles are the gold standard for sources, whether or not they are understandable. The same instructors often try to guide their students by suggesting which journals they should aim for, but the concept that articles are published in issues and volumes of journals rather than as single documents, to be culled out of a mountain of search results, remains elusive for undergraduates because they've never actually seen a journal in print. The full-text database

removed articles from their binders. It takes effort and a sense of tradition to put them back. Curiously, though the articles are online, most of them are laid out exactly as if they were printed on paper.

The library is full of skeuomorphs, design elements that belong to an earlier era, passed along as cultural touchstones for those of us who remember a paper-and-print past, a set of arcane rules and conventions to learn for those who come to an academic library with only the web and their cellphones as their cultural templates. Now I occasionally show students who need to explore 20th century popular culture the *Reader's Guide* and describe it as being kind of like a database, or a Google for the past. Some students are quietly horrified – how does it work? What do all those little numbers mean? Others experience a kind of awe. Look at that fine print! Someone made that, painstakingly putting all those magazine articles into an alphabetical list. Wow.

I'm still waiting for someone to invent an easier way than Zotero or Pinboard for me to manage my trails of association, to let me tap or click or say a command to save every connection I make as I read. That would be sweet. But I won't hold my breath. Instead, I'll finish writing this sentence and save these words by clicking on the image of an object our undergraduates have probably never encountered in real life – a floppy disk.

Reframing Libraries

March 23, 2016

We're doing some soul-searching at my library about how we support student learning and whether the ways we've done it for years are working as well as they could. As at many libraries, the reference desk is seeing fewer consultations and our liaison work with departments could use a reboot. So we're asking big questions: what do we think students ought to learn by the time they graduate? What structures and practices would advance that learning? We'll be drawing on the [Framework for Information Literacy](#) and on the conversations we've had with faculty about what they feel are the most important and complex concepts they want students to grasp.

But it has occurred to me that the ideas about information articulated in the Framework have more far-reaching implications than our instruction programs. Maybe the change in emphasis from individuals finding and using information to understanding information systems and one's own place in them can help us rethink how we support faculty research, build collections, and design our physical and virtual spaces – or, if nothing else, clarify our priorities.

Here's the old definition of information literacy:

Information literacy is a set of abilities requiring individuals to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information.

And the new one:

Information literacy is the set of integrated abilities encompassing the reflective discovery of information, the understanding of how information is produced and valued, and the use of information in creating new knowledge and participating ethically in communities of learning.

There's an emphasis on information as something that is socially negotiated, that is complex, that isn't merely something you find and use but is created by people – including our students. We need to think about this as we design our collections and services.

One of the big shifts in the field that deeply affected everything we do in my small library was the shift from ownership to access, spurred by the rise of the internet and the massive switch to electronic access to journal content. We went from buying what we could afford to licensing year-by-year as much as our budget allowed. We increased immediate access to the journal literature enormously in a few short years. We also benefited from the development of platforms and infrastructure (thank you, [Minitex!](#)) that made requesting books and articles that aren't in our library much easier and faster. Rarely do people need to go to shelves to locate articles these days. Rarely do they fill out a form with bibliographic information to make an interlibrary loan request. Our website has made it close to automatic. That's good. Saves a lot of time and trouble.

At the same time, two other things happened: Google and Amazon changed the way people search and shop, combining convenience with previously unimaginable amounts of consumer choice, making libraries scramble to keep up with expectations. And academic publishing became more and more concentrated and profitable, with libraries paying the bills as faculty faced higher demands to demonstrate productivity and feed their work into the databases we subscribe to. End result: the library became a shopping platform. Knowledge became a commodity. Search became flattened, disconnected from context, journals unbundled and thrown into a vast search engine.

It's kind of hard to see scholarship as conversation or to grasp how authority is contingent and contextual when the sources you need can be called up with a simple keyword search, when the context is not visible, when typing in a topic is so much easier than reading the fine print at the end of an article to discover related research. It's so efficient, but something is lost.

So many of our decisions as librarians in the past decade have reinforced the information-as-a-commodity, research-as-consumerism model that Google and Amazon have made a part of everyday life. Our databases offer more stuff and less context. Results are relevance-ranked by a black box algorithm we cannot review or shape. We want to be of service to the faculty and the curriculum, so we try to hide as much as possible the costs and hassles involved and, as a result, scholars have little idea of the commercial forces that control who has access to the research they do. That deal their society struck with Wiley seems like a smart move. Those chemistry articles they just downloaded, triggering a \$15 token payment per article, well – they need them, and they need them right now. Except, of course, for the seven

articles and that turned out not to be useful after all – but that’s something they can only judge after they downloaded the article.

As librarians, we don’t want to stand in the way of research by exposing the ugly underbelly of the system or adding any friction. We know faculty will bypass the library if it’s at all inconvenient (and they already do). We want students to have as much choice as possible, but they might be unhappy if they realized how that abundance of choice is funded by their tuition dollars, enriching a handful of corporations. So we make the costs as invisible as possible, the acquisition of stuff as easy as we can. A commitment to cheerful service regardless of cost is a hard habit to break.

But I see some promising changes that align with the emphasis in the Framework on creating rather than consuming, on understanding systems of information rather than how to find stuff, on context and making critical judgments that go beyond making convenient consumer choices. If we think about information as something communities create in conversation within a social and economic context rather than as a consumer good, we may put less emphasis on being local franchises for big information conglomerates and put more time, resources, and creativity into supporting local creativity and discovery. We may begin to do better at working across boundaries to support and fund open access to research rather than focusing most of our efforts on paying the rent and maintaining the security of our walled gardens. And as we make this shift, we may be able to stop teaching students how to shop efficiently for information that won’t be available once they graduate. We may help them think more critically about where knowledge comes from and how they can participate in making sense of things.

Platforms and Profits

May 17, 2016

Maybe it's because of my liberal education in a college of arts and sciences. Maybe it's just the way my brain is wired. I'm always looking for connections, and this often happens when scrolling through Twitter. Today two items collided with a third.

The first: Sci-Hub is [still in the news](#). In case you missed it, this is the site that collects copies of journal articles and makes them available without payment. It got a lot of publicity after Elsevier sued the woman who runs the site. Whether you believe her actions constitute a moral act of civil disobedience or despicable piracy of intellectual property, Sci-Hub is [getting a lot of use](#). It's likely to be more difficult to enforce paywalls once people get a taste of what it's like to do research without them.

The second: [Facebook has been accused](#) of influencing what news stories appear in their "trending" section, with former employees accusing the social media platform of bias against conservative news. This has led to some confusing hand-wringing about whether algorithms are less biased than human editors, whether sites like Breitbart count as news, and how much influence Facebook has on people's news-reading habits. News organizations are increasingly giving up a portion of their shrinking ad revenue to Facebook to live inside Facebook because that's where readers are. The [outrage](#) news publishers once felt toward Google when it started aggregating news stories has faded into resignation. Now they feel they have to put their content inside other people's walled gardens if they want to reach readers (and generate ad revenue).

And the third: I woke up on Tuesday to find that one of the oldest open archives of scholarship, [SSRN](#), had been sold to Elsevier. I had to check the date – is this a joke? No, Elsevier, the largest and least loved of the big five commercial journal publishers, wants to own not just content but the process of creating it. They acquired Mendeley, a popular site for saving and sharing citations as well as papers, back in 2013. SSRN will retain its identity but become part of Mendeley, according to [The Bookseller](#), which also characterizes this move as "helping researchers to better manage the publication journey from start to finish." Joe Esposito told [Nature](#) that this is a natural move as free access to research becomes the norm. "The

positioning is well thought out: lock up revenues to the legacy publishing business, move into areas where piracy is not much of an issue, create deeper relationships with researchers and become more and more essential to researchers even as librarians become less so.”

On Twitter, [Jen Howard](#) asked if librarians should be worried. At the [Scholarly Kitchen](#), Roger Schonfeld asks even more questions. Librarians certainly should be thinking about what we can contribute to an open access world – after all, we’ve been advocating for it for decades. We need to figure out how we can contribute to a more open, more accessible world of knowledge. We can’t sit back and watch it happen around us.

But I think it’s researchers who should be worried. Handing over their finished articles to Elsevier hasn’t worked out all that well. If it did, there wouldn’t be so many visits to Sci-Hub. Letting Elsevier become a platform for the entire “research journey” seems unwise.

But to be honest, I’m not at all sure what it even means. How do you wring profits out of workflow? Is knowing who’s working on what and who’s paying attention going to be valuable enough that Elsevier can continue making its astonishing profit margin? Will they offer researchers or institutions metrics for a fee to make those profits? Will Elsevier’s involvement in pre-publishing activities coax authors to publish in Elsevier journals? Will Elsevier become like Facebook, a goldmine of personal information used for generating ads to a captive audience? What will they do about research that detours outside the Elsevier brand – defecting to the venerable [arXiv](#), to newer non-profit platforms like [Open Library of Humanities](#), or yet-to-be-invented platforms like that envisioned by [Paul Gowder](#)?

I suspect Elsevier, being big and profitable, wants to do what Facebook has done – become the place where you go because everybody else is there. I just don’t see how it’s going to provide the profits that Elsevier’s shareholders will likely demand.

And that’s fine by me. I’ve been [boycotting Elsevier](#) for a long time.

When is the Library Open?

June 2, 2016

I've been traveling for a couple of weeks with intermittent internet access so am behind on news, but a couple of stories seem particularly important.

First, [a deal was struck](#) in Florida to have a highly successful for-profit publisher populate a university's institutional repository with links to intellectual property that its faculty created and gave to the publisher. Isn't this like outsourcing the management of the henhouse to Foxes, Inc.? An Elsevier spokesperson says this will help the repository because it's much harder for libraries to get material from their faculty than it is for Elsevier. This is a true but cruel irony. Publishers like Elsevier still have a great deal of control over the prestige that faculty need to persuade other faculty (and administrators and funders) that they are worthy. Still, it's one of those strange moments when efforts to make local scholarship more widely available by making it open is [colonized](#) by the company that for many scholars and librarians is the [poster child of the problem](#).

As bloggers at [IO: In the Open](#) point out, this is a Trojan horse strategy, in tune with Elsevier's [purchase of SSRN](#). While libraries may struggle to get content into their IRs, publishers are reading the writing on the wall and are staking their claim in an open access future. Apparently they want to own as much of the infrastructure of this future (and the metrics those platforms will generate) as possible. Incidentally, this might be a good time to reconsider giving your content to venture-capitalized for-profit platforms like ResearchGate and Academia.edu. They'll no doubt be looking for buyers as soon as their venture capital fairy dust is exhausted, and we can guess who the buyers will be.

Second – further indication that an open access future is inevitable: the European Union has called for all publicly-funded scientific research to be [open by 2020](#). Wait, that's . . . like, really soon. Unlike the approach spelled out in Britain's [Finch Report](#), the EU statement doesn't bend over backward to preserve publisher's revenue streams. It simply says research needs to be open for the public good.

This thing we've advocated for years? It's happening.

Naturally, publishers have [protested](#), saying that the whatever comes next has to continue “the sustainable creation of high quality content” through

maintaining their business. This is nonsense. The way journals are published today is obviously *not* sustainable, which is why these moves toward open access are happening, nor does it have anything to do with *creating* content. The scholarly publishing industry takes control over content created by its authors and reviewed by experts for free, in exchange for the use of publishers' technical infrastructure and the legacy prestige that, in many if not most cases, was not developed by its current corporate owners but was acquired through mergers, acquisitions, and outsourcing contracts with scholarly societies.

But here's the thing: the industry that has profited from a system that is failing is positioning itself to own the infrastructure for open access. Is that what we've fought for?

It's pretty obvious that outsourcing institutional repository management to Elsevier is a bad idea. What's less obvious is that librarians need to move quickly to collectively fund and/or build serious alternatives to corporate [openwashing](#). It will take our time and money. It will require taking risks. It means educating ourselves about solutions while figuring out how to put our values into practice. It will mean making tradeoffs such as giving up immediate access for a few who might complain loudly about it in order to put real money and time into long-term solutions that may not work the first time around. It means treating equitable access to knowledge as our primary job, not as a frill to be worked on when we aren't too busy with our "real" work of negotiating licenses, fixing broken link resolvers, and training students in the use of systems that will be unavailable to them once they graduate. It means being part of the future of scholarship by acting now.

[Ellen Finnie and Greg Eow](#) put it better than I can:

Admirable efforts are being made in all these directions. We have arXiv, DPLA, HathiTrust, Internet Archive, ORCID, SHARE, and other important initiatives too numerous to name. But these nonprofit collaborations have taken time to surface, are still limited in scope and execution, and are taking too long to build.

As we see it, the question is no longer how proponents of open access can work together to build a shared infrastructure for the open dissemination of scholarship, but rather how can we move quickly to jump the political, cultural, organizational, and economic hurdles so these open infrastructure initiatives can move swiftly with development and wide adoption.

This is our work. If we neglect to do it, Elsevier will. That's no future for libraries or scholarship.

When is the Library Open: PS

June 9, 2016

It must be the season for books by librarians about libraries. I have two on my review pile and saw the [IHE story about](#) David Lankes' new book, a [field guide](#) to what he calls "new librarianship" to accompany his [atlas](#). It's interesting how many books are published by librarians who urge us to decouple the image of books on shelves from the idea of the library. In contrast, a non-librarian, Mirela Roncevic, recently wrote [an essay](#) begging librarians to pay more attention to promoting books and reading rather than outreach and developing new programs.

You won't find many librarians making that argument these days, though you will find quiet and stubborn resistance to providing people and funding to actually do the [trendy](#) things we're all supposed to be doing like digital scholarship support, data management, learning analytics, developing open education resources, providing publishing support, and being the local experts at altmetrics. The things we find old-fashioned and slightly embarrassing still have enormous gravitational pull.

It's a weird situation. We won't go on record to say we care about books or that we're fine with paying big publishers big bucks to license big deals because that would be incredibly uncool, but much of our staffing and most of our financial resources go to those things. Redirecting money and staff time from licensed databases to supporting open access projects is hard even if these things have been on ACRL's annual Top Trends list for years.

What really got me thinking, though, was Lankes' argument that librarians should be more integrated into the tenure process by providing support for altmetrics. We certainly could do that – and Robin Chin Roemer and Rachel Borchardt have written a how-to (and why-to) [manual on that very subject](#) for librarians. But I have a real problem with our metrics obsession, our belief that productivity in the form of publication is the most important measure by which academics should be judged.

I think open access to knowledge is really important. I think librarians need to be actively involved in making it happen in a way that doesn't continue to privilege those with resources enough to play the game. In other words, I don't want Elsevier and its cousins to make open access simply a new revenue model. But one issue that gets left out of most open access debates

is whether we're actually publishing too much and for all the wrong reasons. Mostly what I hear is "if you publish openly you can reach more people and collect more badges and show how productive you are!"

When did the word "productivity" enter the academic lexicon? Why have we embraced it so uncritically?

Some [tweets](#) from scientist and blogger [Danielle N. Lee](#) really put this in perspective for me. The entire rant was a thing of beauty, but these excerpts will give you the gist.



DNLee @DNLee5 · Jun 8

2 manuscripts in prep, 2 in review, 2 in press, + grants. This intense focus on writing, when are we expected to *DO* this research?



DNLee @DNLee5 · Jun 8

I understand the value of publishing. It matters. But based on attn received does writing matter more than research, teaching or mentoring?



DNLee @DNLee5 · Jun 8

My complaint is with systems. Systems that are built upon the values of end products and glosses over processes.

So in reply, and as an addendum to last week's post urging librarians to take on the cause of open access before the big corporations own it completely, I would like to add: let's publish in the open, but let's also critique the anxieties that drive the amount of publishing we're requiring of each other. Let's encourage the entire process of research, including daydreaming and chatting and reading and fieldwork and bench science, not just publication of research results. Let's make sure we give one another time to think and give our research its own time to gestate. Let's think about sustainability not just in terms of how we'll budget for open access but in terms of the human beings who do research.

I've [preached this gospel](#) before, but I'm adding it as a PS to my open access argument because the right to access information is important but so

is the right to do meaningful research at a reasonable and humane pace. Our research – and the world it serves – will be better for it. This high-stakes productivity nonsense is destructive.

Must Digital Divide?

June 16, 2016

I attended [a great conference](#) last weekend on digital scholarship in liberal arts colleges – largely but not exclusively attended by librarians and archivists. It was a perfect combination of small size and great presenters. I am not all that au fait with the tools of the digital trade, but I played with some of them while, at the back of my mind, pondering thought-provoking [ideas](#) from Jennifer Vinopal's opening talk about the values that get entangled in data practices and what we can do to be mindful of our biases. It was a good foundation from which to start. She talked about the political choices that influence data structures and algorithms and the ways meaning changes when messages to a specific audience are intercepted and broadcast to be filtered through a completely different sensibility, which is why digitizing a counter-culture magazine from pre-Internet days can be handy for historians but devastatingly invasive for people who were among friends but now are stripped bare in public. Good stuff to think about.

I took notes on a number of nifty tools and classroom ideas and ways to think about library-faculty collaborations, but here are two meta-ideas that applied to all of the sessions one way or another.

Thought One: It's instructive to be in a student's position when learning about technology. There were times when I was lost, or got distracted when other lost people were getting help and I started poking around while I waited and couldn't find my way back, or when I wondered why what was on my screen didn't look at all like what the teacher was projecting, or when I was embarrassed to ask how to do something that apparently is so obvious everyone else had it figured out.

Flipping it around, I wondered about how much energy it can take to learn something that's not intellectually challenging but unfamiliar. One of my favorite sessions involved drawing on pieces of paper. I closed my laptop, picked up a pen, and thought to myself "I'm terrible at this." But draw I did, and it was strangely relaxing. I never fell behind. My paper never vanished abruptly. Nobody needed help because they weren't sure which command would help them make their line curve. It was hard to make us stop drawing, and then it was hard to get us to stop talking, but the cool thing was that we weren't learning about drawing or pens or how paper works, we

were learning how to plan digital scholarship collaborations. Which made me think about how my other workshop sessions were about how to help students think about data and history and economics, but often in the foreground was “how do I enlarge this thing? Which drop-down list was I supposed to use, again?”

There’s always some tug between learning “how to” and learning about ideas. How to read a scholarly argument critically has to be learned even if it’s what’s in the argument that matters. How to write one has to be practiced, and the conventions for using sources . . . well, it all takes time, and that can crowd out the mental energy to understand the important stuff. Figuring out what we really want students to learn and how to strike the right balance between learning *how* and learning *what* is tricky.

That said, I could see ways that “what” could be powerfully experienced with some of these tools. Students can use these tools to uncover the “what” from datasets or primary sources or map coordinates. An [economics professor](#) who uses Tableau in a 100-level course showed how using data visualization to test hypotheses forced students to think about economics more deeply than if they studied a textbook and took tests. But it means teaching differently and taking some of the predigested “what” out of the syllabus to make room for inquiry and invention (and getting lost and becoming frustrated on the way).

Thought Two: Libraries and archives are finding different ways to fold this kind of tool-using and teaching support into their work, and while there’s no standard way in which this work fits into organizations, this enfolding can do something it isn’t meant to do: introduce conflict over power relationships. Within organizations, there is a cool-factor with technology that may reward younger (and often more likely to be male) new hires with resources and status while others are expected to keep existing programs running with no credit and less help. The reverse of that is equally true: new people are often expected to Do All the Things and take all the risk while their colleagues are not required to learn any of the tech the new position supports. It’s basically a resource and glory allocation dilemma and it doesn’t bring out the best in organizations. The same holds true among the faculty in the disciplines: those who embrace new teaching that requires technology feel unsupported and those who don’t feel underappreciated and pretty soon people are throwing terms like “luddite” and “neoliberal tool” around when they could be teaching. In some ways, this issue is felt more keenly in large organizations that have the funding to create new specialized units or

positions. In small ones, librarians who already have multiple responsibilities have to fold it in.

Another related dilemma: the gulf between liberal arts colleges with large endowments and those that are primarily tuition-driven is growing (and don't tell me the poor ones should just die a natural death, already. There's nothing natural about wealth attracting wealth, and it's a shame if a uniquely American form of higher education becomes a boutique luxury good for nobody but the elite and their wards.) It can be frustrating for the poorer cousins to hear about the cool stuff you could be doing for your students and faculty with free open-source tools. Sometimes that first sibilant shifts as you hear it from "could" to "should." That's like hearing you owe it to your family to make healthy organic food choices when your reality is that getting to a grocery store that carries affordable fruits and vegetables takes two bus transfers and you're working three jobs, so you feel both ashamed and frustrated as you go down to the corner and spend too much for food that's not very good.

One Plus Two Equals . . . There are two different ways this kind of inequality could play out. We could see a bifurcation: students who go to well-endowed schools will get the opportunity to learn how to create their own understanding of concepts guided by faculty who have the time and resources to set up conditions for that kind of tool-using inquiry while students who go to the other schools will experience technology as subjects, prodded and measured and profiled by profitable ed-tech that seems strangely attractive to the very schools that can't find the money to hire permanent staff. Those students will be given canned meaning that will be duly measured as they are prepared for the workforce (which actually could use thoughtful, creative, tool-using graduates, but hey, education policy doesn't run on logic).

The other possibility is that in a few years we'll roll our eyes at the phrase "digital scholarship" and "digital humanities" because *of course* it's digital. What else could it be? Remember when we spoke of the "electronic library"? Yeah, that's kind of embarrassing now (even though some idiots still get excited about the phrase "bookless library," as if that's an innovation). We'll still have inequality, but it won't divide us in kind. Large organizations will sort out how they put positions together and those of us who are Bartholomew Cubbins librarians will simply be restyling our hat collection – this is what learning looks like this season? I like it! – rather than resigning themselves to this kind of learning being only for the elite. Our libraries were

always smaller; our toolboxes will be, too – but we can still make sure our students have experience building things.

We don't get to choose whether learning will be digital or not anymore. What we do have to decide is what kind of learning matters – and who gets to have it?

On the Latest Docudrama

June 30, 2016

Did you feel that? That rumble that made all the furniture shake and threatened to topple the library stacks like dominoes (except that we made sure they are bolted securely after the last time)? Did you feel the world reeling around you?

You didn't?

Okay. You're good. Carry on.

There's a bit of drama going on in some quarters of the academic library world over a couple of documents, the older of which was just officially rescinded at a conference. If you've ever been to a faculty meeting, you know how desperately important these battles feel. Every word, every comma is up for debate, and everything is charged with such importance because this document we're working on will be accepted or rejected and it carries in it everything we hold dear. More to the point, it will determine what we will do in future. It will have authority! Except these documents almost never do. They're proxies for what we believe and what we would like to do, and they take a lot of work, but in the end what we do will be something different anyway because teaching and learning is messy and every student, every teaching situation, every semester brings unexpected variations on "here's what works and what matters most."

These documents (in this particular case a [Standards](#) document and a new [Framework](#) document) were developed by librarians out of a belief that students' learning about how information works is an important part of education. Most academics would agree, though they are not likely to agree on what to call that kind of learning, how best to provide opportunities for that kind of learning or even, in fact, what exactly is to be learned. In a sense, though, these documents are testaments of faith in the educational value of libraries, and faith is pretty fundamental stuff. It's that star that you look for in the night sky to remind yourself which way to head when you're feeling lost. I wouldn't enjoy my job much if I didn't have that faith that at least some of the time I play a part in students learning things that matter. But doctrinal disputes can get ugly.

These professions of faith are on the surface statements about what students should learn and say a bit about how we might know if that learning

happens. They read differently because they were written in different decades, but they aren't necessarily contradictory. Nothing in the newer document says "that thing we said students should learn? It's completely wrong and they shouldn't." The dissonance between them is in how librarians describe what this learning looks like and how we should talk about it in public. But the real source of friction seems to be how librarians see themselves in the political economy of higher education. There are lots of arguments being made about the substance of the documents and the workings of the organization and the individuals involved, but I suspect most of the angst comes down to two things: What am I supposed to do now? And who has my back? Those two questions in turn make me wonder how we see ourselves as actors in higher education.

Are we subalterns who need detailed instructions and ready-made templates to do our jobs? Are we employees who need permission and guidance from a higher authority? Or are we free individuals who care about students more than we care about the logistics of program design and accountability? Is this a crisis of faith or a crisis of confidence?

If we have to write SLOs because our institutions require them, it's not that hard. If we have to assess learning and write reports about how much we helped students learn because we have to demonstrate value, we can do that as well as any other academics who have the same burden. If doing these things in ways that actually help students learn is made difficult by your organization, either because of committee-based entropy or a bossy boss or both, then there's a problem with the organization that is about something other than either of the two documents. If this internal squabbling is really an expression of fear that libraries don't matter and librarians aren't respected, then look for evidence to inform those fears and figure out how to respond. Arguing with other librarians or expecting your association to provide ready-made respect won't help much.

There are loads of standards and frameworks out there telling us what we should be doing. These are the records of professional conversations and negotiations about groups of people think matters and what we should do about it. Those conversations can be valuable, but the documents aren't powerful talismans. They aren't rules or recipes. They're a record of how a profession thinks about something at a given point in time. They aren't what we do.

What we do is help students learn, and they don't come to us framed or standardized. They have different beliefs, needs, interests, and goals. We're

not going to harmonize them into a single ideal student, and it's a good thing, too. Churning out standardized people would betray the principles of liberal learning and the independence of thought that libraries should encourage.

Some of us are trying to help 40,000 students learn in giant, confusing research libraries, and that's really hard. Some of us are the only librarian in a library with a shoestring budget helping 1,000 students, a significant percentage of whom are currently homeless or hungry, and that's hard too. The discussions we have about information literacy and the documents that come out of those discussions can be helpful, but they don't do this hard work for us. We each have to do that in the way that works best for our students. Those wonderfully unique people who are trying to learn under varying circumstances, helped by teachers facing all kinds of obstacles.

Let's not get too angry with each other over doctrinal issues. We have work to do, interesting and valuable work that doesn't come prefabricated. Wouldn't it be awfully boring if it were?

Playing, Learning, and the Teaching Problem

August 3, 2016

Alison Gopnik, a psychology professor at UC Berkeley, had [an interesting piece](#) in last Sunday's *New York Times* that has been sticking to my brain like a burr. She argues that our current obsession with preparing children for success gets in the way of their learning. She describes several recent experiments with small children, who are naturally curious and determined to figure things out – and remarkably good at it. They learn about the world around them by observation, imitation, and play, not by being taught. In fact, she argues, if they are taught, they will imitate accurately, but being told how to do something takes away the opportunity to figure things out. When small children observe and imitate, they are testing the physical world around them and coming up with their own understanding of how things work. Explicit instruction short-circuits that process. She writes:

Parents and policy makers care about teaching because they recognize that learning is increasingly important in an information age. But the new information economy, as opposed to the older industrial one, demands more innovation and less imitation, more creativity and less conformity.

In fact, children's naturally evolved learning techniques are better suited to that sort of challenge than the teaching methods of the past two centuries . . . We don't have to make children learn, we just have to let them learn.

Every fall, as new students arrive on campus, I struggle with what to do to help them feel comfortable exploring ideas in the library and beyond. In that first semester, they tend to be stressed and pressed for time. They don't have models in front of them for how scholars do research, but they're often asked to find scholarly sources to use in an argument as they are introduced to academic writing. They are intensely curious about what the teacher wants, if not about the topic they're researching, and often focus on getting that boring task done as efficiently as possible. It's not just that there's no time

for creativity, or that they think creativity is a violation of the rule that you have to quote other people in this kind of writing. It's simply too big of a risk.

When they come to the library for an hour or two to do some guided poking around, they want to know the rules. How many sources do I need? Will these ones do? They're not particularly interested in how those sources got there. In fact, they're often not interested in reading them. After all, it's right there in the rubric: points for citing articles accurately; nothing about reading them. When they patch together quotes lifted out of context, it's hardly surprising. Since they haven't seen how scholarship actually happens, and have never seen this way of mapping out the evolution of ideas, they have nothing yet to imitate or puzzle out. The rules are all they have.

There are ways to help new students get a handle on how scholars invent new ideas. Anne-Marie Deitering of Oregon State University, for example, has [come up with](#) some great ones, and is very smart about taking a [cultural approach](#) to this stage in student learning. But if you're hoping students will practice writing formal academic writing using sources in the way academics do so that when they finally have a chance to do actual research they'll know how to package it, you're doing them no favors. Showing new students how to find sources and cite them might actually interfere with the kind of learning we want, the kind babies do when they are doing what comes naturally – figure out through imitation and play. If you learn how to cite a source before you've had any experience seeing how scholarly writing is webbed together through these not-so-hyper links, if you've never sought a source that you first encountered in another source, this citation business is simply a matter of compiling an ingredients list that's required by law. You have to do it right. There are penalties.

The way we search now isn't through connections, the way scholarly conversations work. We have been doing everything we can to flatten those conversations into a Google-like search box that takes terms in and returns a list of things to choose from, trying to make it easier and more familiar. Chris Bourg, director of the MIT libraries, gave [a fascinating talk](#) a short while ago about efforts to move from search to a richer kind of discovery, one that makes it possible to see connections and find new paths to follow. She builds on that old saw that only librarians like to search, people like to find, and asks how we can help people discover and have fun while they are building their own understanding.

What I'm wondering about right now is how to help new students see the library a place where you can discover and have fun rather than a place

where you accomplish tasks efficiently by following obscure rules that, if broken, carry harsh penalties. How will we give them a taste of the culture they've landed in, a sense of what people do at universities, and help them experience their own capacity to learn through self-directed exploration? How will we convince them that what we do with ideas is play with them when they are so used to being taught?

The Woes of Wikipedia

August 23, 2016

A Wikipedia editor who I know, Karen Coyle, [recently left the site](#), finding it an inhospitable place for a woman. It's [nothing new](#). But considering the cumulative impact of the “encyclopedia that anyone can edit,” it's troubling when it turns out a lot of people actually can't edit it because there's a significant chance they will run into fellow editors who engage in trollish behavior.

When I say “trollish,” I don't mean the kind of weirdly anarchic, playful, but gross and offensive behavior documented by Whitney Phillips in her fascinating ethnography, [This is Why We Can't Have Nice Things: Mapping the Relationship between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture](#). In the context of Wikipedia, I'm referring to the ways that behavior reflects and is reflected in our current life online. Phillips describes “highly stylistic lulz-based trolling” that flourished on 4chan in the first decade of this century, which takes a kind of Rabelaisian joy in wreaking havoc online for no purpose other than their own entertainment. She goes on to address how aspects of their humor became the stuff of digital franchises and boosted the profits of social media platforms, how some trolls became political activists, and how trolling reflects “pervasive cultural logics” of our time.

Those cultural logics include valuing logic over emotion, winning over negotiation, aggressive confrontation over accommodation, individual liberty over the common good, and a sense of entitlement wrapped in a defense of “free speech” – speech that can win by aggressively silencing others. One of the curious ways individuality in this context is expressed is through creating a like-minded community that can swarm and overcome enemies. It's a team sport. These are also characteristics that have made combative talk shows popular, comments sections too toxic to be [representative of a news organization's readership](#), and has influenced anti-establishment [campaigning](#).

When [editors on Wikipedia squabble](#) over whether an article has a sufficiently “neutral point of view” (attempts to include aspects of gender or race in articles are often considered [not neutral by definition](#)) or whether an individual is [sufficiently notable](#) to be included or whether [someone is qualified](#) to be an administrator, it's easy to use arcane rules and endless

debate to wear people out. Though there is a [civility policy](#) and an arbitration process, it [doesn't always work](#).

Wikipedia has [acknowledged the gender gap](#) and encourages people to join, and [edit-a-thons](#) strive to fill in the gaps. But it's getting [harder to get volunteers](#) to spend time contributing to a site when they will have to spend their energies defending their contributions. As Karen [points out](#), Wikipedia's gender problem can't be fixed by recruiting women editors to fix a community that is so often hostile to them. [Adrianne Wadewitz](#) also spelled out some of the problems with expecting women to make Wikipedia a "nicer place" or to fill in all the missing bits. There's something ironic in the fact that Wikipedia's article on "Gender Bias in Wikipedia" currently has the note "This article needs to be updated."

Andromeda Yelton has written [a brilliant piece](#) about how difficult it is to separate ourselves, gender and all, from how we negotiate our interactions in a place where a complicated set of rules is used for establishing and presenting a singular truth, something that becomes visible when librarians (80 percent female) get together with Wikipedians (90 percent male) to consider ways to join forces. There is an adversarial, argumentative bent in much Wikipedia deliberation that celebrates a kind of discourse that is inhospitable to those who aren't so inclined. A motto for Wikipedia is "be bold," and that boldness surfaced in men interrupting and women remaining silent, making her wonder whether there was some value of "humbler discourse patterns."

I'm seeing a problem so much more difficult and more slippery than training, or documentation, or policy...our genders as ghosts in the very language we speak. Boldness as liberatory only for the bold, creating a space where the strengths of female-coded discourse patterns are pushed off to the margins, where humility looks like weakness.

Humility is basic equipment for trying to understand each other. How can we have empathy for alternative perspectives without it? How can we let go of beliefs that don't hold up to scrutiny if all we can be is bold?

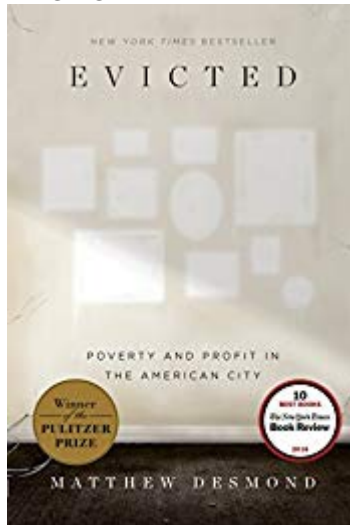
There's a lot to like about Wikipedia. Nearly ten years ago I wrote [an article](#) praising it when the big debate was how to discourage students from using it. It has improved immensely since then through the efforts of a lot of people who voluntarily spend time there, including librarians, academics,

and students. It's a shame to let that work, and the promise of a universally accessible and ever-growing encyclopedia, go up in flames.

This Rant is for Social Scientists

September 29, 2016

I'm reading [Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City](#) by urban ethnographer and extraordinarily fine writer Matthew Desmond. It's a model of narrative non-fiction and ethical story-telling about people whose lives belong to them but whose stories reveal a lot about exploitation, poverty, and the complexity of untangling the multiple strands that go into a social



problem. It's hard to get that balance right – communicate stories without manipulating either the reader or the subjects. Desmond shows how to tell such stories respectfully and with empathy, somehow magically bringing us inside the circle of lives that are not ours, inviting us to do the work of understanding rather than telling us what to think. I'm not even halfway through yet, but it's brilliant, and I love the way he weaves something of a journalistic sensibility (for example, pointing out that when he didn't personally witness something, he confirmed it with multiple sources) with scholarship (e.g. "this experience I've just described is consistent with the findings of these studies"). My daughter, who recommended it to me, says she'll have to read it twice. She knows the footnotes are valuable, but the narrative is so compelling she doesn't want to break away and look at them this time around.

It's not easy to write this well, to combine edge-of-your-seat narrative

momentum with scholarly rigor. Not only is it not easy, but we're schooled to write in an inaccessible style, as if our ideas are somehow better if written in a hard-to-decipher script that only the elite can decode because if people who haven't been schooled that way can understand it, it's somehow base and common, not valuable enough. If you're able to read this message, welcome! You're one of us. The rest of you are not among the elite, so go away.

Even worse, we think our hazing rituals around publication and validation are more important than the subjects of our research, who couldn't afford to read it even if we chose to write in a manner that didn't require an expensive decoder ring with a university seal on it. We say "it's for tenure" or "that's the best journal" and think that's reason enough to make it impossible for people without money or connections to read it.

I don't know how else to put this: it's immoral to study poor people and publish the results of that study in journal run by a for-profit company that charges more for your article than what the household you studied has to buy food this week. I cannot think of any valid excuse for publishing social research this way.

Because you don't have to. [SocArXiv](#) makes it easy to share your research. Your institution may have a public research [repository](#). There are [open access journals](#) that don't charge authors and have the same peer review standards as other journals. You can reserve the right to share your work, and we're finding sustainable ways to fund public knowledge. Will it take a little more of your time? Yeah, it's a cultural shift, which is obviously complex, and you're so busy.

But if you actually think your research matters, if you think research could make people's lives better, if you use the phrase "social justice" when you describe your work, you should take that time. It's unethical not to.

I realize I'm scolding. I'm shrill. I'm being disrespectful. I know it's more complicated than that. But I also know the tangled systems that put families on the streets are complicated, too, and I have this absurd idea that social scientists and good people working to make a difference could help disentangle those systems. If your research isn't accessible, it's not a solution, it's part of the problem.

Oh, and . . . you should also take the time to read this book. Yeah, it costs nearly as much as an article from a social science journal, but it's probably on the shelves of a library near you.

A Library for All

October 20, 2016

PEN America recently published [a substantial report](#) on freedom of speech on campus ([covered here](#)). This seems a natural subject for the organization to address, given its mission.

PEN America stands at the intersection of literature and human rights to protect open expression in the United States and worldwide. We champion the freedom to write, recognizing the power of the word to transform the world. Our mission is to unite writers and their allies to celebrate creative expression and defend the liberties that make it possible.

Given the contentiousness of discussions around safe spaces, trigger warnings, microaggressions, and so-called “political correctness” in recent years, their report is welcome, as is their finding that freedom of speech is compatible with inclusivity and sensitivity to minority perspectives. It should be of great practical use on campuses for prompting discussions and negotiating common ground around these issues. The call in their [Principles on Campus Free Speech](#) to cultivate an appreciation of free speech without categorizing issues as right- or left-wing is particularly timely. The use of the phrase “politically correct” in this election cycle has positioned free speech as a thing conservatives and libertarians defend against liberals, progressives, and members of minority groups, but as PEN points out, it’s something that is valuable and valued across the board. It’s certainly not something the left should cede to the right just because discussing race, ethnicity, sexuality, and social justice is fraught and difficult.

Skimming through this report made me think about a discussion librarians have been having recently. Somewhere along the line, it became received wisdom to say libraries and librarians are neutral. I’m not sure where there came from, exactly – it’s not neutral to value intellectual freedom; it’s a stand we take, actively. Ensuring that we have multiple voices on subjects in the library is a conscious choice to promote access to a diversity of thought, something that gets librarians in trouble from time to time (though far more often in school and public libraries than in academia). Encouraging students to value evidence-based thinking is a cause we advance in our instruction,

but it's not universally embraced. Taking social responsibility and the public good seriously – that's not a neutral stance. It's even a little radical these days.

Some of the issues we encounter are a microcosm of campus-wide issues. This year at my library we highlighted Indigenous People's Day instead of Columbus Day. We have created guides to resources on hot topics: Black Lives Matter, Islam in the news, the refugee crisis, gender identity and the bathroom debate. Often these resource guides and displays have been created to support events on campus – a workshop or lecture – but sometimes they are merely intended to expose what we have to offer related to national debates.

This doesn't mean we aren't supporting more traditional categories of knowledge; we have guides to philosophy and religion and chemistry, too. We just want to make visible our belief that every issue can be examined more closely, that the research habits students develop in their courses is equally valuable for interrogating what's happening in the wider world. To be honest, students are too busy managing their course work to read up on these issues, but we still want to convey that message: this isn't just for school. Even after you graduate, libraries can help you find stuff out and make up your mind.

The architectural language of libraries and the organizational systems we use are never neutral. I make a point of talking about how helpful it is to know something about the ways knowledge organization can skew things. Just look at the heated brawls that erupt on Wikipedia, arguing whether or not something violates the NPV rule – that it doesn't adhere to a neutral point of view. For some editors, mentioning race or gender in an article is a violation of neutrality that needs to be edited out. Search engines are more blind; they encode our biases algorithmically. Old-school biases are embedded in the Library of Congress classification system. No, we're not going to relabel and move all those books even though times have changed and the relationship of one category to another has shifted. But we can help researchers think about how all systems of organization take a stance.

The architecture of an older library may announce its mission through impressive flight of steps leading to the front doors over which, perhaps, the names of great men are carved. We might wonder why those particular names were chosen and not others, and we have to find ways to make the building accessible, not because it's the law but because all those steps say to some people "this place is not for you." We have to be aware of those

silently-voiced statements and ensure our buildings and collections express our values and are open to debate.

In libraries and across campus we have to achieve a balance. You are welcome here, and so are you. We stand for a diversity of voices, and we are against censorship. There's nothing inconsistent in that, nor is that a bland kind of neutrality, a non-position. I'm reminded of something Wesley Lowery, an African-American reporter for the Washington Post, said in an [interview](#) on Code Switch, one of my must-listen podcasts:

When we talk about trying to be objective, we begin the conversation with a lie. Like, we begin the conversation with the lie that we don't have biases and that we don't perceive the world certain ways, right? I strive to be fair. And that fairness means that I have to interrogate my own biases. That fairness means I have to go out of my way to make sure I'm giving a fair, good-faith hearing to people who I know I disagree with.

That's fair enough. Never neutral, never totally objective – but striving to do justice to a wide variety of perspectives.

Curation, Evaluation, and Open Access for Teaching

November 22, 2016

I had the pleasure of serving on a panel at the American Anthropological Association annual meeting in Minneapolis that brought together teachers, many of them from community colleges, to discuss how (and whether) to use open access materials in the classroom. It was a lively discussion that touched on how valuable open access journals are for cross-disciplinary research, how difficult it is for faculty with heavy teaching loads to find the time to curate readings and select texts, how valuable textbooks (as opposed to a menu of primary articles and other readings) can be for students who are struggling to see the big picture, and how much effort and thought goes into designing a textbook. We also had an interesting detour into students' reading habits and the value of books that aren't online. Panelists were Nina Brown, Anthony Balzano, Evin Rodkey, Ryan Anderson (who I've "known" online for years but hadn't actually met) and Anne Brackenbury, who provided a valuable publisher's perspective. Katie Nelson was our discussant and general cat-herder. I promised to share my remarks, so here they are.

The description of this roundtable discussion – how do we curate and evaluate open access materials in teaching situations? – reminds me of the near panic some teachers were in as students began to use the web. They suddenly wanted sessions on how to evaluate online sources even though they were perfectly used to students using out-of-date books or poorly-chosen articles. The questions asked of a website are no different than those one should ask of a book or a journal article. The problem was that faculty were so used to judging books and articles, the filters they had in place to sort out options had become automatic, deeply embedded tacit knowledge. When confronted with a website, they were nearly as lost as their students were when confronted with a shelf of books in the library. What do we look for? How do we know what's good?

Curation is not native to the Web, nor is evaluation only difficult with open resources. Library shelves have lots of out-of-date books on them; our databases are full of third-rate journals and worse – because in addition to our prejudice that something is good if it's expensive, we also have been

persuaded that the more consumer choice we can offer, the better. This makes both publishers and vendors fill library databases with stuff that has little value.

Let me give you a couple of egregious examples. For years, a general database that is available in most academic libraries included two white supremacist journals: *Mankind Quarterly*, founded to publish articles that would scientifically prove the biological superiority of the white race, and *American Renaissance*, which is far less subtle about its neo-Nazi and white nationalist mission. These were included because one thing librarians ask for from databases is more full text content. They finally were removed from the database, but it took effort, and some librarians accused those of us who wanted them removed of censorship. An additional irony: *American Renaissance* is free online. Students who found those articles on their website would be far more likely to see those articles in a context that would help them grasp what they're looking at, whereas in a library databases, the articles are mixed in with others and it's harder to see where a particular article originated.

Here's the thing: The virtues of academic publishing don't depend on a particular revenue model. Equating quality with exclusivity betrays what is perhaps the most important of academic publishing values: advancing knowledge for the public good. If your model depends on ensuring that only the most privileged will have access to what you publish, that's an automatic fail.

It's important for students to understand why good research can be useful. It's not because peer reviewed research is better than any other kind of research, or that articles dressed a certain way are more true than articles that aren't, but that academic research is driven by values that matter. Researchers ask genuine questions without knowing the answer in advance. They gather evidence ethically. They weigh alternative interpretations. When they make their findings public, they let readers know how they arrived at their conclusions. They also explain how their work builds on others' efforts to understand this world, and they make all of this public so that others can build on it. This is collective action for the public good.

The scholarly record documents an ongoing conversation, one that we invite students to join. By issuing this invitation and asking them not just to consume research, but to reflect on it, apply it to other situations, and even contribute their own original research to the conversation, we are giving them agency and suggesting that research isn't just a thing you do for school,

it's a lifelong disposition to inquire and a set of cognitive practices that can help us make up our minds, solve problems, and act on the world we're in.

When we treat research as a commodity that we judge based on its price and branding, we obscure the real value of research and we position students as mere consumers. Worse yet, when we suggest that a particular business model – one that gives five corporations that make obscene profits legal control over 70 percent of social science research – we are complicit in making knowledge a luxury good that is deliberately withheld from the public for reasons of exclusivity, prestige, and profit. We are participating in a system that increases tuition costs to students while guaranteeing they won't be able to consult the research we told them was important as soon as they stop paying tuition. This is wrong.

So what do we do? Here are some thoughts.

- Help students see what makes research good or not so good by looking at actual content, not by training them to recognize brands or to check the “peer-reviewed” box in library databases.
- Don't say “this would be a good journal for your paper.” Explain what a journal is – the ongoing record of conversations among a specific group of people asking a certain kind of question.
- Don't say “you must use peer-reviewed sources from scholarly journals.” Explain why, in a particular context, peer-reviewed research is preferred over other kinds of sources. But first, make sure it's true. Sometimes an investigative journalist has done research that's highly ethical and may be more helpful than the peer reviewed research available on the same subject.
- Don't say “use library resources, not stuff you find on the web.” You're not preparing students for the world into which they will graduate.
- Don't pretend that research matters and then hide your own research in journals whose business model promotes injustice and public ignorance. Your students won't have access to your research unless you take steps to make it accessible. Luckily, that is increasingly possible.
- Don't despair. Asking students to do research is a valuable learning experience. If we clear away the clutter of our tacit knowledge and think about why research matters for our students – and for the world – we can design authentic experiences that help them develop intellectual muscle that will serve them after they graduate. Work with them to frame questions that matter to them and help them query the

things they encounter as they explore answers, and help them recognize quality research design and ethical argument. And be comforted that good research will be accessible to them – because so much more of it will be open in future.

- Finally, think about how an open access journal like [Cultural Anthropology](#) could be used as a textbook for understanding the conversation of the field. The website has not only the journal and its articles, which is great, but a variety of types of texts: [Hot Spots](#) and [Dispatches](#) and [podcasts](#) and so on. [At the conference, I also learned about [Sapiens](#), which also presents anthropology research in a timely, accessible format.] Together they present a much richer conversation than what you find by searching for articles by topic using a library database. It seems to me to be proof that open access isn't the problem, it's the solution.

Something a student told me stuck with me. She was struggling a bit to keep up with all the assigned reading and felt in some ways unprepared, but she talked about why she loved anthropology. "I took Cultural Anthropology my first semester ... it's really interesting that there's so many theories and it makes so much sense sometimes. It amazes me how much sense it makes." Learning about anthropology made a deep connection for her. If it matters, and she thinks it does, then we shouldn't lock that knowledge away.

Burning Issues for Operation 451

January 4, 2017

A lot of people were [disgusted](#) when they heard [Simon & Schuster will publish a book by Milo Yiannopoulos](#), a notorious right-wing troll who makes a career of offending people and hounding his chosen enemies through mass intimidation. He has even been banned from Twitter, which is incredibly difficult to do. He tried to offend his publishers with grotesque jokes as well, to no avail. They really wanted to publish his book.

In my library circles, the debate around this book is whether libraries should refuse to subsidize his aggressive bigotry and risk offending a large percentage of their communities, or if they should buy the book so people can form their own opinions – and risk offending a large part of their communities. Either response will satisfy the author, who loves nothing better than to stir up outrage. It's his schtick. It's how he makes a living.

For librarians, it's a case study in how to interpret what we value and how we enact those values in practice. It's not all that difficult a dilemma for academic librarians; we can buy a copy and assume people will accept that it's okay to spend a few bucks on a book that will serve as a primary source for understanding trolls; even if what the troll says is offensive, it's documentation of our contemporary culture. Books are rarely challenged in academic libraries, but in public libraries, it's another story. If there's a demand for a book, they may buy dozens of copies to avoid having hold lists running into the hundreds, so we're talking about more than a few bucks. We're also talking about money that, once spent, can't be used to make the library shelves more diverse, less dominated by the latest celebrity thing. People have a tendency to think that if a public library buys a book, they endorse what it has to say. And everyone feels they have a say in how their local tax dollars are spent. It's a real dilemma, if possibly short-lived. Books like this tend to end up in the book sale bin when interest wanes, as it will.

As it happens, I've been poking around in the history of American libraries lately and it has been illuminating to see how our established values evolved over time. In the early days (1870s – 1930s) we relied on faith. The “library faith” was the notion that reading was beneficial for both individual enlightenment and for democracy because reading would create an informed public. In the beginning this meant censorship of “addictive” and

“mind-weakening” popular fiction in favor of improving non-fiction. Almost immediately a compromise had to be negotiated with the masses, who didn’t want anyone telling them what to read. Eventually the library faith included a democracy of reading tastes.

It wasn’t until the end of the 1930s that defending intellectual freedom became an article of library faith. An Iowa librarian, disturbed by the rise of fascism and the burning of books in Europe, wrote a [Library Bill of Rights](#) which was adopted by the American Library Association a year later in 1939. It took around fifty years of public librarianship and the crisis in Europe for librarians to collectively and publicly reject censorship and embrace the value of open debate and exposure to multiple viewpoints as a fundamental value and purpose of libraries. Intellectual freedom was reaffirmed during the McCarthy era, when librarians and publishers jointly issued the [Freedom to Read Statement](#) which includes the following statements:

It is in the public interest for publishers and librarians to make available the widest diversity of views and expressions, including those that are unorthodox, unpopular, or considered dangerous by the majority.

Publishers, librarians, and booksellers do not need to endorse every idea or presentation they make available. It would conflict with the public interest for them to establish their own political, moral, or aesthetic views as a standard for determining what should be published or circulated.

It is contrary to the public interest for publishers or librarians to bar access to writings on the basis of the personal history or political affiliations of the author.

It concludes

We do not state these propositions in the comfortable belief that what people read is unimportant. We believe rather that what people read is deeply important; that ideas can be dangerous; but that the suppression of ideas is fatal to a democratic society. Freedom itself is a dangerous way of life, but it is ours.

I’m tempted to say our times are different. When bots can flood social media pretending to be people sharing human opinions, when we’re saturated with opinions on all sides, when the problem isn’t having access to controversial

ideas, it's figuring out how to manage the inundation, maybe we need to rethink this. In fact, the ALA has continually added to these documents with [interpretations](#) guiding librarians on a host of practical issues. Librarians are currently working out the best ways to help students and the general citizenry navigate these fraught times in which we experience both polarization-by-platform and the murky combination of clickbait, fakery, and hyper-partisanship. Maybe this book, by someone who is so very accomplished at silencing others through his aggressive practice of "extreme free speech," should be placed in libraries – next to books that talk back. Maybe the best response is making our libraries sites of spirited and generous conversation about what we actually mean when we talk about free speech.

This week two leading public librarians, Sarah Houghton and Andy Woodworth, launched [Operation 451](#) to encourage librarians to think how we can honor key articles in the Library Bill of Rights (4 and 5) and the first amendment (which together make a nifty reference to Ray Bradbury's classic, composed in a library) and support the right of all to read, to assemble, and to speak, paying particular attention to non-celebrities who are vulnerable. It's a great initiative to reconcile our historic commitment to freedom to read with dedicated support of those voices that are at risk of being silenced. I'm in.

Books (Still) in Print

January 10, 2017

People have a lot of odd beliefs about books. Nobody reads books anymore – [except they do](#), overwhelmingly. Well, maybe old folks still read books, but not kids – though actually kids are much more likely to read books than people over 65. Well, but that's because they're reading ebooks. Nope. People of all ages still prefer print. The Gallup poll making the rounds is just the latest in a long string of surveys and studies that never can quite put an end to the commonly-held belief that “people don't read books anymore.”

A lot of academic librarians, seeing their circulation figures decline since the internet was invented, have concluded that students don't want books anymore. Some of the decline in circulation is thanks to the increasing convenience of finding scholarly articles. It wasn't all that long ago that finding a book on the shelf was a lot easier than tracking down articles using indexes and abstracts, scraps of paper and a lot of patience. Some of the decline is because so many of the factual questions people used to look up in books can be answered with a Google search. And sometimes, a book placed on the shelf never leaves it. Rather than clutter up the library with books nobody wants, many librarians have started licensing collections of ebooks. Not only do they save space, they surely are more likely to be used. Except . . . [maybe not](#).

My former colleague and pal Amy Fry has studied circulation of print and ebooks where she works at Bowling Green State University's library. Looking at books acquired between 2008 and 2014, nearly three quarters of print acquisitions had been checked out at least once. Okay, not a hundred percent, but it's a higher percentage than many librarians would guess. During that period, the library acquired (or licensed) twice as many ebooks as printed books, but the printed books added during those years were far more likely to be “checked out” – meaning circulated or reshelfed versus clicked on to read a description, look at a table of contents, or download a chapter. It's worth noting that two-thirds of BGSU students live off campus and the university offers a number of fully online degree programs.

I've resisted licensing loads of ebooks because I'm at a residential college, so getting to the library isn't a hardship, and because I prefer the rights we have with print (such as being able to loan books to other libraries –

interlibrary loan and ebooks don't mix). We hand-pick our books with the help of faculty in the disciplines, and the books they want us to have are often not available in ebook packages. So far our students haven't begged for digital editions, and though they take up less space, they aren't cheaper. I'm grateful to have an in-depth analysis (and a significant literature review, to boot) to back up my hunch that ebook packages aren't necessarily the way to go.

Here's another library conundrum: given how much each academic library spends on their systems, we should be able to run an analysis like this fairly routinely – are our books being checked out? in which subject areas? – but no, it's actually an incredible amount of work. We have the data, it's just not joined up in a useful way. Hats off to those who make the effort.

Meanwhile, every December an English teacher at a rural high school about an hour's drive away from my college brings a group of students to our campus to spend a morning at our library doing research for a paper. They don't have much of a library at their school, and they haven't had a librarian in years, ever since an entrepreneurial principal got all the students iPads and enough favorable notice for his innovation that he was able to move onto better things. It has been interesting to see what grabs these students, year after year. When full-text databases were new, they ran through reams of paper, printing things off. In the past five years or so the thing they want the most is books. Minnesota libraries are pretty well networked so we are able to check our books out to these students, who return them through their local public library. If those books were electronic, they couldn't take them home. They couldn't access them across the internet. They would only be able to use them while physically in the library.

There's something very satisfying about seeing high school students stream out of our library with books in their arms. I'm glad we can still do that.

Objectivity, Professionalism, Citizenship

February 8, 2017

Lewis Wallace, a reporter for the radio news program *Marketplace*, who had been encouraged to engage with his audience to boost the show's brand, [wrote a blog post](#) that questioned whether journalistic objectivity is possible and, after some back-and-forth with the management, was fired. You can read [his account](#) of what happened and read [a report about it](#) by Laura Hazard Owen at *NiemanLab*. It's traditional for news organizations to require their reporters to make no public statements about their personal beliefs in order to avoid any appearance of bias in their work. This extends to not participating in protests, putting bumper stickers on their cars, expressing political preferences on social media, or in any way making their personal views public. Yet, since the new business model for funding journalism depends on engagement through social media, journalists are encouraged to socialize. Just not . . . about journalistic objectivity .

This must sound familiar to any academic who has been careful to leave personal political opinions at the door as they enter the classroom. Or who has hesitated before posting something online, recalling instances in which academics' political expression led to calls for dismissal.

I see two problems with this traditional bright line that requires journalists to back away from public discourse. First, I think everyone should have a right to participate in civic life. I wouldn't be in favor of, say, telling police officers they can't advocate for a candidate on their own time or participate in a public demonstration out of uniform. A police officer typically has taken an oath that applies whether they are on duty or not, and they are expected by their bosses to avoid embarrassing the force – but that shouldn't extend to removing them completely from public discussion of issues. What about judges? They have to be circumspect, but that doesn't stop them publishing books about their lives and the law – and it doesn't seem to make them less capable of doing their job. It's not impossible to draw distinctions between personal opinion and professional duty.

Second, claiming objectivity is achieved by avoiding personal speech doesn't really solve the problem that all of us have of figuring what it means

to be objective in practice. Every police officer has to weigh up a tense situation to decide what course of action to take. They are expected to consider department policy, their training, and the law as they make those decisions, but they are also going to have to rely on their personal interpretation. A good cop is skilled at reading situations and understanding fluid social situations and calibrating their response accordingly. Every lede a journalist crafts involves acts of judgment that influence the reader – often using emotional cues that are designed to encourage the reader to care enough to continue reading. That's how stories work. Reporters must strive to be fair to multiple perspectives, but objectivity is never perfectly realized. Good reporting strives to represent what's going on as fairly and dispassionately as possible. Simply transcribing statements from opposing sides is not objectivity. It's not even reporting.

There are obvious parallels for academics and librarians, and some difficult terrain to negotiate. A history instructor has to be mindful of the power relationships in the classroom and respectful of student opinions that she finds personally wrongheaded. But if she were to include in a lecture about the Holocaust the possibility it didn't happen because a lot of people think it didn't, she would betray her professional duties as a historian. A scientist should never fudge data or jazz up a finding to press a particular point (or score the cover of *Science*); but they may well investigate a scientific problem because they personally feel the answer – whatever it turns out to be – matters. Their opinion shouldn't shape the results, but they should not be prohibited from bringing their specialized knowledge to bear in civic discourse as private citizens.

When I'm working with a student who wants help finding evidence to use in a paper to prove something that I know is untrue or up for debate, I could claim “neutrality” and simply help the student find sources that support that argument, but instead I do that tiresome thing of having a conversation about how evidence works, make the case that cherry-picking facts is not how you construct an ethical argument, that when we ask genuine questions what we learn may actually change our minds, that winning isn't the point, understanding is. To do anything less would betray, fundamentally, the values of my profession. It wouldn't be doing the student any favors, either.

That, to me, is where the balance gets struck. If your job is “to seek the truth and report it” as journalists, then you must be prepared to call out lies. If your job is to understand the past, you don't whitewash it because it makes people uncomfortable or puts your job at risk from political pressure.

If you are a scientist, you design experiments carefully and base your interpretation on the evidence while publicly defending the value of science. If you're a librarian, you have an obligation to help students approach information critically and with an open mind. It's that simple. And sometimes so very complicated in practice

How Libraries Became Public I

April 26, 2017

Of all of our cultural institutions, the public library is remarkable. There are few tax-supported services that are used by people of all ages, classes, races, and religions. I can't think of any public institutions (except perhaps parks) that are as well-loved and widely used as libraries. Nobody has suggested that tax dollars be used for vouchers to support the development of private libraries or that we shouldn't trust those "government" libraries. Even though the recession following the 2008 crash has led to reduced staff and hours in American libraries, threats of closure are generally met with vigorous community resistance. Visits and check-outs are up significantly over the past ten years, though it has decreased a bit in recent years. Reduced funding seems to be a factor, though the high point was 2009; library use parallels unemployment figures – low unemployment often means fewer people use public libraries. A for-profit company that claims to run libraries more cheaply than local governments currently has contracts to manage only sixteen of over 9,000 public library systems in the U.S. Few public institutions have been so impervious to privatization.

I find it intriguing that the American public library grew out of an era that has many similarities to this one – the last quarter of the 19th century, when large corporations owned by the super-rich had gained the power to shape society and fundamentally change the lives of ordinary people. It was also a time of new communication technologies, novel industrial processes, and data-driven management methods that treated workers as interchangeable cogs in a Tayloristic, efficient machine. Stuff got cheaper and more abundant, but wages fell and employment was precarious, with mass layoffs common. The financial sector was behaving badly, too, leading to cyclical panics and depressions. The gap between rich and poor grew, with unprecedented levels of wealth concentrated among a tiny percentage of the population. It all sounds strangely familiar.

The changes weren't all economic. A wave of immigration, largely from southern and eastern Europe and from the Far East before the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, changed national demographics. Teddy Roosevelt warned of "race suicide," urging white protestant women to reproduce at the same rate as other groups to make America Anglo-Saxon again. The hard-

won rights of emancipated African Americans were systematically rolled back through voter suppression, widespread acts of terror, and the enactment of Jim Crow laws. Indigenous people faced broken treaties, seized land, military suppression, and forced assimilation.

How interesting that it was during this turbulent time of change when the grand idea of the American public library – a publicly-supported cultural institution that would be open to all members of the community for their enjoyment and education – emerged.

Like so many grand social projects dreamed up by our current tech billionaires, the first great public libraries were started by the Bill Gates and Koch brothers of their day. The architecture of these libraries emphasized that culture was the province of the elite, palaces guarded by lions and approached up flights of stairs. These impressive institutions were supposed to provide immigrants with a carefully curated introduction to the treasures of Western civilization, but the masses had their own ideas; they filled newspaper reading rooms and skirmished with librarians over adding popular literature to the canonical collection of uplifting literature. (Long story short: they won).

But even these early palaces of culture had one distinguishing feature: they were designed to be free and public (though in the Jim Crow south, “the public” didn’t include African Americans, who were excluded from the libraries their taxes helped pay for until the civil rights era). Joshua Bates, a financier whose funds kick-started the Boston Public library, had three conditions for his gift: the library building should be an ornament to the city; it should include a large reading room with tables that could seat up to 150 people; and “it shall be perfectly free to all, with no other restrictions than may be necessary for the preservation of the books.”

These palatial libraries were ambiguously democratic. Though “free to all” might be inscribed over the doorway, their policies were often conservative, with ungenerous opening hours that discouraged workers with limited free time, closed stacks to prevent unsupervised browsing, and architectural hints that culture was a purifying pursuit, consistent with the City Beautiful movement which proposed serene and classical beauty as the cure for urban problems. Yet they were popular, and they laid the groundwork for a durable expectation that communities would have free public libraries. Toward the end of the 19th century, another vision for public libraries emerged, championed by women in towns across the country and boosted by another

industrialist with a philanthropic bent. But that's another story for another blog post.

This response to turbulent social stress would be unimaginable today. President Trump's proposed budget completely defunds the Institute of Museum and Library Services and cuts LSTA grants to local libraries. Our [new FCC commissioner](#) has cut out a program that made internet access affordable for resource-poor schools and libraries, rolled back privacy protections so ISPs can get into the targeted advertising game, and now is attacking net neutrality rules so that our telecoms will be able to favor their content and limit access to competitors' – or to [sites that aren't run](#) by deep-pocket corporations.

What made the vision of “free to all” so attractive in the late 19th century? Why now do we have to pay for “free” information services with our privacy and, ultimately, our freedom? And, given this dismal state of affairs, why do free public libraries persist?

How Libraries Became Public II

April 30, 2017

Here's another interesting thing about the origins of American public libraries. We have women to thank for most of them.

Oh, sure, Andrew Carnegie had something to do with it. Unlike his fellow mega-rich philanthropists who built libraries, he didn't want to build palaces. He wanted to produce relatively humble public libraries on an industrial scale, promoting the establishment of libraries in neighborhoods and small town throughout the country using a common set of standards, processes, and even architectural plans. He thought access to libraries could improve those among the working classes who wanted to improve themselves. They could be better workers, and some of them might even rise above their circumstances and become rich.

His 1889 essay "[The Gospel of Wealth](#)" argued that competition encouraged "survival of the fittest" and the "betterment of the race." Once the best of the best acquired wealth, they should use it to better the world, because they – having proven their superiority – were best positioned to make the wisest decisions about what was good for society. Luckily, he liked libraries.

We're even luckier that libraries became a cause for women. Carnegie provided partial funding for about half of American public libraries between 1887 and 1917. Women were the driving force between many of those, and for most of the other half, too. Encouraging literacy and wholesome uses of free time was something respectable middle-class women were allowed to do without stepping on masculine toes. Soon, the libraries they founded weren't just providing reading materials; they were bringing aspects of social reform movements into libraries, providing English lessons for immigrants, hygiene lessons for children (who often were taught how to wash their hands before they could touch the books), folk dancing lessons, and public lectures. A library in Minnesota bought a sewing machine that sewing circles could use; branches in New York opened rooftop gardens where children who otherwise only had streets to play in could enjoy fresh air. (I'm obliged to Abigail Van Slyck's [Free to All: Carnegie Libraries & American Culture, 1890-1920](#) and Wayne Wiegand's [Part of Our Lives: A People's History of the American Public Library](#) for teaching me library history).

Women not only founded libraries, they became librarians. Melvil Dewey (a serial entrepreneur and anti-Semite who liked women so much he became embroiled in a sexual harassment scandal) thought they had a capacity for detailed and routine work that suited them for the profession – and even better, they could be paid far less than men for the same work. He invited women to join the first class in the first library school at Columbia, which he had to move to Albany because Columbia didn't want to change its men-only admissions policy (and because they were exasperated with Dewey's habit of doing whatever he wanted).

Women's supposed skill at detailed and often tedious work positioned women to become computer programmers, too. During both world wars, women were "human computers," calculating ballistics trajectories and doing the complex calculations for the building of the atomic bomb. African American women did the math that put men on the moon, as the book and film *Hidden Figures* documents. And when the ENIAC general purpose computer came along, women programmed it. It only became Brogramming when software became more profitable and prestigious than designing hardware. In the mid-1980s, 40 percent of computer science majors were women; now it's less than 20 percent.

In the early years of this century, the [free-wheeling hacker ethos](#) of the early internet melded with a world view in which high-stakes capitalism, freed of government interference or outdated business models, would allow a new meritocracy of entrepreneurs to radically change society. Entrepreneurs would disrupt tired industries and create new ones thanks to their hard work and intelligence. When they had more money than they could spend, they would fix education, start their own space programs, and seek ways to extend lives. It's a twenty-first century version of Andrew Carnegie's *Gospel of Wealth*, but unlike Carnegie's philanthropy, the idea of public funding for public goods doesn't seem to come into it much.

The [five wealthiest companies today](#) (Apple, Google, Microsoft, Amazon, and Facebook) are all in the tech sector, and they are incredibly dominant in our daily lives. By entrusting so much of our information infrastructure, our shopping, and our social lives to profit-driven companies we've lost something important. The huge profits of these companies are built on surveillance capitalism and/or capturing a lion's share of the attention economy.

This is the start of [Choose Privacy Week](#). [Most Americans are unhappy](#) about their loss of privacy, but they aren't sure what to do about it. Librarians

might be able to help. They know something about privacy, and they care about the public good. The economic aggression and hubris that characterizes tech culture is far from the quiet, humble commitment public libraries have made to the public good for more than a century.

Google claims “to organize the world’s information and make it universally accessible and useful” and Facebook says it wants “to give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected.” In reality they are both advertising companies, and they want to know everything they can about all of us because that’s how they make their enormous wealth. If the tech industries shared the values of librarianship, we’d have a more just world – and maybe working for the public good wouldn’t seem like such an archaic concept.

Peering Into Peer Review

May 24, 2017

A recent hoax has gotten a lot of attention, including here at [Inside Higher Ed](#). To demonstrate that the field of gender studies is prone to accepting utter nonsense as scholarship, two wags got an article published in a peer reviewed journal and then pointed and laughed.

Well, it's a bit more complicated than that. First their article was rejected by the journal to which they submitted, and then (because the publisher knows how desperate academics are to publish and because they know how to make money) the manuscript was efficiently "cascaded" – sent to a less discerning journal that would publish it for a fee. (Both journals are owned by Taylor & Francis; this practice of cascading rejected articles to branded open access mega-journals that publish large volumes of papers is common among giant academic publishers as they seek ways to make open access publishing part of their business model.) The moment it was published, the hoax was [revealed](#). It has since been removed from the Taylor and Francis site, though the authors have kept a copy online.

It's another Sokal moment proving that gender studies and much of social science is foolish, postmodernism is balderdash, and academic publishing too full of jargon, theory, and lax standards. Man-hating feminists and climate change got thrown into the parody, too, to demonstrate the dominance of "morally fashionable nonsense," which I guess is a way of saying "political correctness" without all the political baggage.

Pointing and laughing has a long history in academic publishing. In a blog post [Ketan Joshi](#) (cited in the IHE article) names several "gotcha" moments in the recent history of peer review. These included a nonsense paper [accepted](#) by a scam conference outfit – of which there are many, to go by the contents of my inbox; the rather more embarrassing [inclusion in databases](#) compiled by Springer and IEEE of abstracts of 120 computer-generated gibberish papers reportedly given at conferences that are probably of the kind landing in my inbox; as well John Bohannon's deliberately [nonsense article](#) written in non-standard English accepted by numerous scam operations (and rejected by genuine open access journals) and [a delightful article](#) titled "Get Me Off Your Fucking Mailing List" the text of which consisted of the title repeated for several pages published for a fee.

What can we conclude from these kinds of hoaxes? There are plenty of people out there who are happy to take your money. The only folks who were chastened by these hoaxes are the two legitimate publishers – Springer and IEEE – who got sloppy as they included fake conference abstracts in their subscription databases. The rest don't have reputations at stake. They're scammers. Of course they will accept nonsense papers, so long as you pay them. They might have a bridge to sell you as well, or a fortune awaiting you in a Nigerian bank. The lesson isn't that peer review is broken or that open access is a fraud. It's simply that you need to think before you send your research off to a publisher you've never heard of – or before you assume all lines in every CV represent genuine peer-reviewed research.

Joshi also mentions a peer review failure on a completely different scale: Andrew Wakefield's *Lancet* article claiming, on the basis of a sample size of twelve with a dubious methodology, that vaccines cause autism – a finding that was not only sloppy but [deliberately fraudulent](#). That [fraud](#) continues: thanks to that article and the author's grandstanding the Somali community in my state is suffering from a [measles outbreak](#). Wakefield's discredited theory has led to the deaths of children. So far as I know, nobody has died because of an article published by a scam faux-journal website.

The recent hoax took inspiration from Alan Sokal, who in 1996 had a parody article taken seriously by the editors of *Social Text*. Sokal wasn't tilting at gender studies; he was annoyed by postmodernism and culture studies for challenging something he believed was obvious. "There is a real world; its properties are not merely social constructions; acts and evidence do matter," he wrote when [explaining](#) his motivation. "What sane person would contend otherwise?" It was an attempt, like the recent hoax, to delegitimize somebody else's discipline through ridicule. The peer review process itself however, wasn't on trial. At the time, *Social Text* was not peer-reviewed but rather operated in the "little magazine" tradition, publishing political essays and social critique without a referee system.

Anyone who has participated in peer review knows it isn't a foolproof guarantee of quality. In 1982 two pre-tenure scholars [concocted an experiment](#), resubmitting a dozen articles in manuscript form to the same psychology journals that had previously published them, finding in most cases they were rejected, citing methodological flaws, though the only difference was that fictitious authors and institutions were substituted for the prestigious authors and affiliations of the originals. It's [not a perfect system](#), and there are various improvements that have been proposed from

time to time. But there's another factor that I haven't seen mentioned much in discussions of this latest hoax.

Apart from the problem of scammy pseudo-journals or the supposed lack of rigor in other people's disciplines, or the potential for the peer review process to be biased, another issue seems to be in play, here: the demand for scholars and scientists to be insanely productive, with productivity typically measured in publications. Though there are variations in how those demands are spelled out across disciplines, all of them seem affected, and it creates the conditions for scams, the dubious recycling of rejected articles for profit, and intellectual exhaustion.

It's hard to produce good research under these conditions. It's hard to find enough reviewers who can read papers thoroughly when so many manuscripts are being submitted. It's hard to keep up with what's new or wade through all the chaff when it's time to review the literature. It's hard to resist the urge to salami-slice research into as many publishable units as possible when you could instead be spending that time on designing experiments or archival research or simply on thinking. What do we get for all this illusory productivity? More truth? Greater knowledge? I doubt it.

I'm not sure how to put a stop to this unhelpful acceleration of publishing demands, but the idea that publications are the measure of the worth of academics is a hoax that has serious consequences.

The Boundaries of 'Information' in Information Literacy

June 1, 2017

Academic libraries spend a lot of time and energy thinking about student learning. A 2016 Ithaka [survey of library deans and directors](#) indicate that they perceive the most important role for the library is “helping undergraduate students develop research, critical analysis, and information literacy skills,” with “supporting and facilitating faculty teaching activities” coming in as a close second. A recent [round up of projects](#) in the Assessment in Action projects that are intended to demonstrate the value of libraries do so almost exclusively in terms of student learning (or, to use the new buzz phrase, “student success” which isn’t exactly the same, but seems to please administrators more). Countless hours are being spent on interpreting and implementing the new [Framework for Information Literacy](#) which has some ambitious ideas about what students should learn. As I work at a teaching-oriented four-year liberal arts college, none of this is particularly novel. My library’s reason for being has always been student learning, and we’ve never stopped trying to figure out better ways to support it. But I keep wondering what the post-graduation value of this learning is and whether what we include in the definition of “information literacy” is enough these days.

Students need to learn how to use academic libraries to do academic work. But not all information is academic, and students will need to know something about the wider landscape of information to function in a world that’s highly driven by networked and powerful information systems. As I browsed through things I’ve recently [bookmarked](#) to read, it struck me how influential some of these information issues are in our daily lives and how little we talk about them when we talk about information literacy. They’re complicated. They aren’t immediately applicable to the courses and assignments students are working on, so there’s no clear relevance. They’re new and slippery and hard to convey. But still, they seem important. Here are few examples of what I mean.

- Surveillance has become the dominant business model of the internet and, by extension, news media. This has huge implications for

intellectual freedom and for society at large.

- Privacy is more important than ever, but surveillance is the default setting. There are [things we can do](#), but most people don't know about them. (If they did, it could threaten the business model of the internet and news media.)
- [Aggregated data](#), much of it gathered through companies that build wealth through surveillance, is being used to determine who gets jobs, who gets arrested, who gets mortgages, and who gets elected – or at least what highly-tailored messages we see that nudge us to vote for one candidate over another. Our lives are increasingly governed by big data locked in big black boxes, combined and sold in the dark.
- [Big Data](#) has the capacity to do many wonderful things, but we need some social agreement on how it can be used ethically.
- The systems we rely on are increasingly important but extraordinarily vulnerable because so many of them depend on networked software that isn't secure. It doesn't take much to [take out internet service](#) in large parts of the world, to [set off](#) a city's warning sirens, or to [take over computers](#) in businesses and hospitals worldwide. It doesn't help that governments are more interested in exploiting software vulnerabilities than in securing us from attack.

As important as it is for libraries to help students learn while they're in college, I'm really curious about what it all means for life after college. Should we consider these kinds of issues part of information literacy? If so, does anyone have ideas for how to include knowledge of present-day information systems in our information literacy efforts? Or are the concepts they learn as they navigate academic information tasks sufficient preparation for understanding information systems they encounter beyond college?

Belonging Online and In the Library

June 12, 2017

Librarians have been thinking quite a bit about their library as a place in the last decade or so. They also try to make their digital spaces convenient for users to orient themselves and get to the information they seek (while also placating the marketing folks who decide what the institutional website should look like). Though we try to make the library where I work a hospitable place with a user-friendly website, I wonder what it looks like to students who are new to the place. When I was an undergraduate I made a nest in my university library. I actually liked writing papers and when I needed a break I'd browse some random part of the stacks: *Hakluyt's Voyages* – that looks cool. Huh, *An Elementary Welsh Grammar*. Wonder if I could learn Welsh? I didn't like it when a uniformed guard busted me for having food in my carrel, yet I never felt like I didn't belong there. He was the one who seemed out of place. But I was a weird kid, and privileged, growing up with the unquestioned expectation that I would have a university library in my future and it would feel like home.

Kate Bowles, who writes elegantly about higher education at [Music for Deckchairs](#), recently posted [an essay](#) on “kith,” the sense of place and belonging that goes along with kin, our family relationships. (I'd never actually thought about the meaning of the first half of “kith and kin.”) She quotes Susan Beal: “Kith is not only the place you know and love, but the place that knows and loves you back.” In the essay Bowles examines what that means in terms of “digital citizenship” from her perspective in Australia where actual citizenship has become a fraught subject, a category of exclusion, as perhaps it always has been though not necessarily recognized as such. I'm thinking about this as I start to plan a course that will use digital humanities tools to explore identity and the internet. I know from experience that what seems obvious and comfortable to me is a matter of familiarity. It's hard work for many students who would rather not be doing it anyway, and thinking about what happens to their data when they use social media is deeply uncomfortable, as is discussing their multiple social media identities. Those are private except for their close friends and the

numerous invisible data-mining companies that exploit those identities and relationships.

Bowles concludes with some thoughtful questions:

Are there places that we love online, environments where we feel at home, that seem to love us back? Is this about user experience, or ethos? Is it about the trust we're willing to place in design, in what data is kept and what is done with it? Can we feel at home under conditions of continual digital surveillance? Can we love a place that is manipulating us for business or political gain? Is it ever possible to experience kith when the whole thing is set up, controlled, regulated and organised in service of values we don't share?

I often ask questions like those about the digital tools I use and the social spaces I visit online, but they seem like useful questions to ask widely about higher education as well. Do our students feel at home in our spaces, or do they feel like customers who get frustrated with the service or like investors who feel scammed or like imposters who will be kicked out as soon as they are discovered trespassing? What do we do to live out our values in our institutions, and what can we do about those intransigent barriers that thwart us? How do we approach proposed solutions to problems we may not understand historically? (See Audrey Watters on [personalized learning](#) as “freedom from the regulations that have been put in place in the last sixty years to try to force educational institutions to be more equitable.”) Why do we propose sweeping change without recognizing the problems staring us in the face? (See John Warner on the [non-revolutionary “transformation”](#) that could be had by simply hiring teachers full-time and paying them decent wages – simple yet somehow impossible.) How much of the difficulty students have using libraries is due to complexities of copyright and the legacies of traditional publishing that linger in the switch to digital and how much is due to barriers we librarians erected long ago and don't even see? To what extent do we require students to comply with our established norms, or do we nourish conditions in which they can create their own?

Bowles' essay is a response to an issue that came up in DigCiz, an [ongoing online conversation](#) involving scholars from around the world. It's new territory to me, but I see a few familiar faces there. Maybe I'll check it out and see if it's a place where I would feel at home.

Tell Me If You've Heard This One Before

July 6, 2017

Another day, another article with the man-bites-dog lede “libraries, threatened with irrelevance, now care about students instead of dusty old books.” I won’t bother linking; they are legion.

Libraries aren’t threatened with irrelevance and we don’t face a Sophie’s choice between books and students. In the 40-plus years I’ve been working in academic libraries, both as a student at an ARL library (they had a letterpress! and taught classes on hand-printing books long before they thought to call it a maker space!) and as a librarian working in a small undergraduate library, there was never a point where books lost out and services for students won. From what I can gather from the historical literature, American academic libraries have always provided services to help students learn, and they still have books.

The library I work in today was built in the early 1970s and the planning documents made it clear it was a “teaching library” that must accommodate whatever form learning might take in the future. The internet as we know it wasn’t on the planners’ horizon, but multimedia learning was hot. Luckily the architects, guided by a smart and persistent librarian, designed a flexible floor plan with ample room for wiring and more electrical outlets than the architects thought we needed (though, of course, we’ve had to add more). But none of this was hugely novel. The libraries that predated the current one back to the college’s founding were also designed for learning. We had a lot more books in the 1970s than we’d had in the 1870s, but housing books wasn’t the primary purpose any of those libraries. Learning was. Always.

Books had primacy in the past because students have always prized efficiency. In the 1970s, it was a lot easier for students to find information in books than through other means. Finding articles entailed flipping through indexes or abstracts, interpreting abbreviations, writing down the details, checking the catalog to see if we subscribed to the publication and had the relevant issue, tracking it down on the shelves, and using it in the library or spending money to photocopy the article because journals were harder to replace than books and keeping a complete run was fetishized. Finding a

book simply meant looking up call numbers for things that you knew would be in the library unless they were checked out and you could take them home. Easy peasy.

The convenience ratio between using books and using articles flipped. When the library still wasn't connected to the internet, we had InfoTrac CDs running on a PC connected to a dot matrix printer. Magic! When it suddenly was easier to print out articles than to find books, the dominance of the book in the lives of students shifted (though so far as I can tell, the 1970s multimedia craze never really made a dent). Similarly, a lot of basic questions were hard to answer before Google and Wikipedia. Sure, we get fewer questions asked today, but information is easier to find, hurrah! Any question that has to be asked of a librarian simply because the package in which the information needed is hidden in an inconvenient place, online or off – that's not reference, that's troubleshooting a technical problem. I don't mind doing it, but it would be better to not have the technical problem in the first place so we could instead talk about how to frame a question, develop strategies for exploring a topic area, or discuss how to evaluate arguments or interpret primary sources. Having information easier to find does not render libraries irrelevant. It helps us focus on what matters.

So people now find information more conveniently in places other than books and book use has naturally declined, but that hasn't made books obsolete. An academic long form argument often provides the kind of contextual information that students need and scholarly articles omit. We still buy books, and they still get checked out by young folks who actually like [books](#) and [libraries](#), despite the claims of their elders. And we do lots more, too, adding new services and resources if they support the curriculum and a liberal arts education and phasing out work that no longer seems a priority. We have operated this way since the college was founded. It's nothing new.

Administrators who rely on libraries the least (and mostly didn't use them even when information was harder to find) seem to be the ones most likely to predict their irrelevance. Maybe it's because libraries are expensive and they think it's all free on the internet (it isn't); maybe it's because they are responsible for student academic support offices that are too scattered and ill-housed and a library renovation could solve that problem (it might). Saying "it's about students, not books" is a strategy to fend off complaints when books are put into storage to make space for new services. (It won't, but [that's another story](#).)

What I think has changed the narrative is the metrics mentality. Libraries

once compared themselves to others based on how many volumes they had. Now they're measured by what they contribute to institutional productivity. Depending on the institution, that may mean student retention or it may mean contributions to patents and grants – or both, along with a whole host of measures that can tick along on a constantly-updated dashboard demonstrating value. Whether we're counting books or measuring the library's contribution to productivity, it has nothing to do with books versus services. It's about branding. In the past, reputation was measured in books, and now it's not.

In the meantime our work will always involve supporting learning, and some of that learning will involve books, as it has for generations and will for a very long time. It turns out the 21st century library is actually nothing new, or rather libraries have always been as new as they have to be.

Information Literacy and the Great Divide

July 13, 2017

There are many reasons why [we are seeing party lines form on whether the press and higher education are on the whole bad for society](#). Our Pluribus are no longer Unum. They never were, though the dividing lines are drawn more thickly now.

When I was growing up “hardhats” – men who worked in construction and manufacturing and probably belonged to a union that helped them negotiate a middle-class life – had no use for higher ed because they despised the students who were dressing oddly, growing their hair too long, publicly enjoying drugs, sex, and rock-n-roll, and protesting the war in Vietnam from the safety of a college campus. Hard work and patriotism versus radical elites who never worked a day in their life – sound familiar? But political parties back then didn’t align with those differences. Hardhats were likely to vote for the party that supported labor unions, and the south was a Democratic stronghold. The party (and, let’s face it, a lot of unions) made accommodations with Jim Crow and waved Confederate flags until difference were irreconcilable and the south turned red.

Politics in my youth meant cutting deals with people in other parties, not just with lobbyists and donors. There’s a compelling visualization of a [2014 study](#) of cross-aisle cooperation between 1949 and 2012 makes it pretty clear that cooperation is no longer how the legislative sausage is made.

We’re getting less Unum in many ways that have a lot to do with [how we decide](#) as a society to organize our common needs as well as the personalization of what we see run through two giant advertising firms (Google and Facebook) not to mention the [fracturing of our information diets](#). The rise of a vigorous “alt-right” news universe [has no paralleled on the left](#), unless you count all of traditional news sources as left-wing, which of course is an “alt-right” argument that has convinced a lot of Republicans to distrust the press.

These are all information issues. We look at data and draw congressional districts to yield political results. We study the numbers and devise new ways to make it hard for people who won’t vote for your candidate to vote at

all. The current congressional majority wants to starve the next decennial Census because it will gather information that could shrink the influence of their base. And we use data very deliberately to divide and conquer at the ballot box.

We have been using detailed personal data and computers to craft targeted political messages for a very long time. Remember the smartypants Harvard undergrad who got famous for using public information to design an atomic bomb as a school project? [He founded Aristotle, Inc.](#), gathering voter registration data and mashing it together with other data using a spanking new Apple II computer to microtarget voters in the early 1980s. It's a lot more sophisticated now. There's more data and more power to crunch it.

So we have a divided society with nearly entirely separate news environments and a political trend toward stark separation. No wonder there's a party difference in how people view higher ed.

There are a great many reasons people might feel higher ed is failing us – substituting student tuition for public funding as a revenue stream has resulted in crippling personal debt. We've cut costs by exploiting underpaid adjuncts who have the most to do with students' learning while increasing salaries of the top administrators tasked with running their institution like a business. We've created an individual-focused rewards structure for faculty that means they are too busy publishing research to explain it to anyone outside their specialty. And don't forget the age-old shock of having your kids come home at Thanksgiving spouting new ideas and disrespecting all the work you did to raise them right.

But what seems to have really grabbed the right at present is the idea that conservative values are being throttled in expensive PC indoctrination camps. In fact the president of the conservative National Association of Scholars [is pleased that Republicans don't trust universities](#). He's been telling people not to for years. What seems most effective though, has been to pour millions of dollars into traveling provocations that get in the news when the circus comes to town. The Young America's Foundation which has trained conservative leaders like Jeff Sessions and [has a national program](#) of sending hard-right conservative speakers to campuses hoping that reactions to provocateurs like David Horowitz and Ann Coulter will provide viral evidence that higher ed is corrupting our youth. Robert Mercer who [poured money](#) into *Brietbart*, the Trump campaign, and into developing more effective ways to use data in campaigns to elect the people he wants to have

in office is apparently [still paying Milo Yiannapolous's bills](#) as he continues to develop a trendy brand of shock-jock campus celebrity.

When Facebook finally admitted some culpability for fake news after Trump was elected many librarians said we had the answer: we knew how to help people spot the fakes. But asking people to conduct background checks on everything they read is a big ask, and if your news universe doesn't have any contiguous borders with other people's news, those skills won't help much. Yet critical information literacy is more important than ever. We've been divided very deliberately by the clever use of information and by creating networks of novel information sources amplified by social platforms that exist to gather and exploit data, not to inform. We need to heed Deep Throat's advice to follow the money as part of understanding how information works today. We need to pay attention to how information delivery shapes what we see. We need to help one another see the big picture.

There's a lot more to information literacy than learning how to search and tips for evaluating sources. There's also a lot at stake.

Getting Sand in My Beach Reads

July 19, 2017

Summer is traditionally when people feel permission has been granted to read for fun. I do it year round, with or without permission, and rarely at a beach. My escape pod of choice is crime fiction, but lately I find my tastes within the genre are getting complicated.

I picked up the mystery bug from my mom, an autodidact avid reader who favored Jane Austen, Angela Thirkell, and British Golden Age mysteries. She wasn't an Agatha Christie fan, but she loved Dorothy Sayers and Margery Allingham, so I did, too. The detectives' families were in Debreth's and characters were more likely to drink a tawny port than a pint. Police were generally sidekicks at best, and often less instrumental in solving a case than the gentlemen's gentlemen, dispatched to conduct undercover work belowstairs. My working class mom knew the hierarchy of British titles as well as she knew the alphabet.

It was much later (after an undergraduate Russian literature binge) that I began to read the inheritors of the American hardboiled tradition, and my tastes began to align more with the claims Chandler made in "[The Simple Art of Murder](#)." He thought the British amateur sleuth was a phony compared to the tarnished knight-errant private investigator, the honorable if bare-knuckled hero of the mean streets.

After women crashed the party (Marcia Muller, Sue Grafton, and Sara Paretsky in particular) and gave it a feminist twist for a few years, popularity shifted to stories about police, forensic scientists, and profilers (what Patrick Anderson terms the "[Triumph of the Thriller](#)"). I never cared for the serial killer trend – too much like slasher films, too much of a morality play in which heroes slay monsters – but there's enough variety to choose from that I've always found good things to read whatever is flooding the bestseller list. Since I got credentialed as a reviewer a few years ago (not a difficult task these days as social media fills the gaps in newspaper reviews), books tend to find me.

Readers expect things from a mystery. It has to surprise, but can't violate the rules of the genre – the solution can't be pulled out of a hat, the reader has to have all the clues available if cleverly concealed, and there has to be some reassurance that justice can prevail (except in the case of classic noir,

where things start out bad and get progressively worse). It has to be realistic enough to sustain disbelief. And it has to entertain at a pace.

Some readers insist that they don't want real life issues in their entertainment fiction, but taking some sort of social position is inescapable whether your chosen heroes are a fusion of Bertie Wooster and Sherlock Holmes solving crimes among the upper classes or FBI profilers peering into the darkness of the not-entirely-human mind. Or for that matter (the latest trend to wear out its welcome) the psychological dissection of characters locked together in an unhappy domestic life. There are reasons these story lines appeal to us at different times in our cultural history, and at the moment I'm finding myself picking through my reading options carefully, looking for ones that offer that say something truthful about this world, not using violence to entertain or portraying police work or forensic science in terms that ignore their real-world limits and flaws. The day after the Orlando mass shooting I suddenly couldn't bear the usual iconography of crime fiction book jackets: blood spatter and guns. And that hesitation lingers.

But variety to the rescue again. There's a lot of crime fiction that no longer appeals, but many writers do fictional work that works for me. In honor of summer I thought I'd share some books that have hit the spot recently and don't make me question why I'm still reading this genre. As they say online, YMMV.

Laurie King's [Lockdown](#) – Recounts a few hours in the life of a school during an era when children are drilled on responding to mass shootings just as an earlier generation prepared for nuclear Armageddon. From the first page, we sense something terrible is going to happen soon, but we aren't sure what direction the danger might come from. She introduces a lot of characters to keep track of as we see the day through multiple points of view, but it's skillfully done and suspenseful.

Jane Harper's [The Dry](#) – Probably not one to read if you live in a part of the country threatened by wildfire at the moment. A man who had to



leave a small town in Australia's outback as an adolescent because of rumors swirling around a friend's drowning, returns for the funeral of another of his friends. He apparently committed suicide after killing his wife and children, leaving only their baby alive. After years of drought, nobody's

surprised that a farmer might snap. Nicely weaves together two story lines with a setting that's guaranteed to make you feel the heat. It's not perfect – the villains aren't as believable as the good guys – but it's a debut that I enjoyed especially for the sense of place.

Speaking of which, here's something to look forward to – Attica Locke's *Bluebird, Bluebird*. I've just finished a review copy (it comes out in September) and it was the perfect answer to my post-Orlando why-am-I-reading-this-



stuff dilemma. Set in a small town in East Texas it's about a black Texas Ranger who was born and bred near there, escaped to a better life, but quit law school and signed up after the dragging death of a black man in Jasper, his "9/11 moment." But it's not just a quest for justice that brought him home; it's also the magnetic pull of the place where he was born. The author conveys that deep connection black folks can have to a place that's drenched in bigotry very effectively. And the mystery is good, too.

Take a Chair

July 26, 2017

Matt Reed [recently addressed the problem](#) of recruiting reluctant faculty to serve as department chair. It's an interesting issue in terms of self-governance (which we claim to like), the lack of respect for work that is more often [maintenance](#) than developing shiny new objects (though it can be both), and a faulty rewards system that promotes individualism over collective work (T&P processes often fail to reward service work, especially when it's routine but necessary maintenance). There's also a tendency to identify with a field rather than with one's nearest neighbors within the discipline, your local colleagues who in most cases are spread thin to represent different sub-disciplines so may not actually be your people. He points out the risks involved in abandoning the chair role altogether in favor of having managers run departments. Who will become higher ed administrators if academics don't have a chance to test the waters and see how well that work fits their interests and skill set? More importantly, are academics really so averse to administrative work that outsourcing it to the administration seems a good trade-off? That's basically surrendering the most fundamental form of shared governance.

I'm thinking about this from an unusual perspective. Nearly all academic libraries are organized differently from academic departments, but not mine. At the Little College on the Prairie the library has always been classified as an academic department rather than an administrative unit and the six librarians have faculty status with the same expectations of teaching, scholarship, and service as other faculty. In the mid-1990s we proposed that we elect a chair using the same procedure as other academic departments, rather than have a library director. This means every three years, we look at each other and ask who's willing; once we've sorted that out, the provost comes to a meeting to ask for nominations and holds an election. The appointment comes from the provost, who has the final word if there's a split in the department or if a nominee seems clearly a poor choice.

For librarians, this may appear a radical way to organize a library. The leadership pipeline in my field tends to involve applying for positions with greater management responsibilities successively, which usually requires moving multiple times, which makes climbing the ladder difficult for people

who have family reasons to be anchored in a particular place. Being good at teaching and research is nice, but service in the form of managing people and library units is what career advancement is made of in academic libraries. Many librarians are more interested in being librarians than in being managers and, while these categories are not exclusive, they can shape whether or not someone decides to approach the ladder and give it a try. That's too bad, because a lot of librarians may never have a chance to discover that they actually find budgets interesting, that sorting out personnel challenges can be rewarding, or that they're good at making a case for their library to higher administrators.

Every one of the six librarians at my library signed on to be chair someday. For the four who joined us after our radical departure from the standard library org chart, it was stated in position announcements, and applicants had a chance to ask what was involved before they committed to it. I'm sure some people see that expectation and think "nope, not something that appeals to me" but we've had no trouble recruiting great talent. I am not sure if people in other departments on my campus are told they have to be prepared to serve as chair, but it might be a useful thing to discuss during a search if it's an expectation.

To make this work, being the department chair in our library is not a full time job, unlike being a library director. Responsibilities and decision-making are shared so everyone is contributing to the work and learning the ropes at the same time. We all can read a budget. We all help write plans and reports and position announcements. (This sharing does not take endless meetings. It's probably no more time-consuming than having top-down decisions explained and implemented.) Like most departments, continuity and nitty-gritty knowledge of how stuff works comes from a staff member who's in it for the long haul. We all get a crack at department leadership and, once in that chair, we all can look forward to the day someone else is going to do it. We could theoretically reach a moment when nobody wants to take it on because of family responsibilities or sabbatical plans or external professional commitments, but I'm not too worried because support from colleagues is built in. That's not always the case in other departments, which makes succession planning more difficult.

The other thing that makes it work is that we share a sense of mission for the library. We don't have deep divisions when it comes to what we should be doing or whether one thing is more important than another. When you're working together, you want your watches synchronized and your compasses

all aligned. We have the trust of faculty in other departments who think we're doing the best we can and consulting about important stuff as well as the trust of an administration that sees it's working.

The elephant in the library is that, unlike other academic departments, we have a relatively large number of staff who are not members of the faculty. Negotiating how our new collegial system would include these staff colleagues, who they reported to, and which decisions were rightly theirs and which were faculty responsibilities took a few years, but I think we've [figured it out](#) though we haven't been able to pay these employees as much as we feel they deserve or provide the kind of promotion path faculty have. Those decisions are made by higher-ups.

I doubt many libraries will follow our lead. It's not how most libraries do things. Higher administration may feel they have less control over a unit with a large budget without a consistent direct report and there's the possibility that librarians will become too independent and ornery. It also may not fit other institutional cultures the way it fits our Scandinavian-flavored egalitarianism. Frankly, at too many institutions, librarians are second-class citizens, seen as the help, not professionals capable of self-organizing wisely.

But if libraries can't learn from our example, I'm going to be bold enough to suggest maybe other departments can. It's a lot easier to step into the role of department chair if you know you won't be on your own, that your colleagues have your back, that they are willing to shoulder some of the responsibility and the occasional angst. That this is respectable work that everyone needs to be willing to do for the good of the department. That it doesn't matter that you weren't trained as an administrator, you're smart enough to figure things out with your colleagues' help. That important decisions will be collective because that's how the best decisions are made. That since the work is shared, so is the know-how before you take a seat. That this chair isn't on a dark side; we're on the same side. That this is work that needs to be owned by faculty. That it can be interesting and sometimes even fun. That it isn't inconsistent with the lives academics lead – or their values.

Inevitably Open

August 1, 2017

According to a new study uploaded [in preprint form to PeerJ](#) and profiled in [Science](#), subscription-based publishing is a doomed business. Scientists have flocked to Sci-Hub because it's easy to use – no traipsing from one site to another, no fumbling for a credit card or a delay while an interlibrary-loan request is processed. Just drop in a DOI and there's a good chance you'll get the paper instantly or, if it's not already in Sci-Hub, very shortly. The chances papers will be there are greatest for the largest publishers, including those that have brought suit against Sci-Hub. (Interestingly, the researchers charted Google searches for the site's name and saw they spike every time a suit is brought against the pirate aggregator.) The conclusion: "this is the beginning of the end for subscription scholarly publishing."

Of course, there is one problem: libraries have to subscribe to these journals in the first place for them to end up in Sci-Hub, which relies on borrowed (or phished) library login credentials. What the popularity of Sci-Hub has demonstrated, though, is that the limited access libraries have to offer is less effective and efficient than what can happen in a less copyright-hobbled world. How are you going to keep the scientists down on the intellectual property farm once they've seen how much easier it could be?

Another recent Science article (hat tip to my friend Larry for pointing it out) reports [a study conducted by Danish researchers](#) (posted to the open repository [BioRxiv](#)) that found you can learn a lot more by data-mining the full text of a large numbers of scientific papers than by simply analyzing a lot of abstracts, which is what you do when you can't get hold of the actual papers. The researchers created two pools of data: one, abstracts of over 15 million articles, the other the actual texts of those articles. I'm tired just thinking about it. They faced two big challenges: getting the publishers' permission to mine their articles and making PDFs consistently machine-readable. They're related issues: journal publishers use different formats which makes conversion to text files labor-intensive, and (no surprise) they aren't willing to let researchers share the articles that have been painstakingly readied for text-mining. Though 15 million is a lot of articles, the authors drew on only three sources: the backfiles of two large publishers (Springer and Elsevier) and [PMC](#) from the National Institutes of Health.

It would be incredibly valuable to be able to text-mine vast amounts of scientific knowledge, but that's tricky when so many publishers are involved using different formats who have little incentive to make the literature available for mining. It would be sort of like mapping the human genome, but with more intellectual property lawyers.

I have no idea where we're going with this. If the SciHub model succeeds, it will kill its host. Maybe there's some poetic justice, there; publishers that depended on libraries budgets have slowly but surely been killing their hosts, too. Open platforms like [ArXiv](#), [Humanities Commons](#), [BioRxiv](#), [SocArxiv](#), and similar author-upload initiatives are gaining ground. Big Deals are meeting with [big resistance in Germany](#), where 60 universities have dropped their contracts with Elsevier, following similar fraught negotiations in the Netherlands, Finland, and Taiwan. Another site of resistance is among editorial boards. The *Journal of Algebraic Combinatorics* is the latest journal to be [migrating to an open platform](#). Springer will keep the journal's name, but the talent and the reputation are moving to a new address. (Similar "flipped" journals are moving from commercial publishers to the library-membership-funded open access platform [Open Library of Humanities](#).)

There seem to be certain things that people want and have come to expect: to be able to read research without a hassle, to be able to share their own research without having to ask permission, and to be able to develop new ways to understand what the research is telling us without endless legal roadblocks. These things can only happen if research is open access. We'll also need a lot of interoperability, standards, indexing and preservation plans, not to mention solving the knotty problem of sustainable funding models. Librarians and other OA activists are working on it.

But look at how much change we've adapted to in recent decades. A physics professor once told me what a marvelous thing it was when fax machines became common equipment. You didn't have to wait days or weeks to read a preprint, it came in minutes! We'll figure this out, and then we'll wonder what took us so long. Though librarians have pushed OA for years, it's really up to authors and societies to determine what the future looks like. All indicators are pointing toward open.

Just Business

August 8, 2017

One of the reasons so many librarians felt angry about [Elsevier's acquisition of Bepress](#) is that Elsevier has become an enemy of libraries and what they stand for. Elsevier would, naturally, disagree, but their business practices, like those of four other giants (Wiley, Taylor & Francis, Springer/Nature, and SAGE) seem predatory and destructive from the library perspective. As they have grown bigger, their power has grown, and their prices and negotiating power makes libraries incredibly vulnerable. Not just libraries: a lot of books have not been bought because these five publishers gobble more and more of static library budgets.

But there's another reason that deserves some unpacking. Bepress is just a very attractive but empty platform without the stuff we put in it. Libraries that chose it did so in order to help their communities make things – and make them public. We paid for a useful box to put stuff in, and because it's our labor and our stuff that made Bepress worth acquiring, it feels as if somebody stole our stuff.

Mind you, platforms matter. Bepress was attractive, relatively easy to use, and was smart about aggregation and discoverability. The open source alternatives available are not an option for small libraries that don't have technical staff (and when you're small, there's a good chance HR and higher administrators decide what happens with library positions. If someone leaves, that line may vanish. If you say you want to convert an existing position to do tech, the powers that be might decide that line should be given to the IT department. Sometimes you have to advance with one arm and part of another tied behind your back.) Tactically, outsourcing your tech needs to Bepress was a sensible way to move forward. Moving forward means fighting the big guys with their big deals by helping faculty and students publish without them, by taking on new roles within existing constraints, by trying something rather than simply wring our hands about the serials crisis. So it was taking on Elsevier by making things that could be shared on our terms.

Libraries are used to vendors changing hands; merger mania is in full swing among library vendors. It's a pain, but it's what it is. There's something different about having a platform that hosts stuff you helped to build sold out from under you. This is why people get upset when Facebook and Twitter

and Instagram change up their rules, or when Amazon buys Goodreads after Amazon failed at social. It's a reminder that our stuff, our creations, our hard work curating and formatting and building community, is incredibly valuable – but it isn't ours.

This, of course, is exactly what got us in trouble in the first place. By letting large profit-oriented publishers take over society journal publishing and scholars' copyrights, we became hostages to an unsustainable business model. Now there's another business model on the ascendant, one that gives us places to show our stuff while gathering data in the background. We're quite used to that business model, one that turns us into self-marketers. Sure, it's kind of creepy, but the way we live now demands metrics and these platforms are all about public performance and building reputations. The big-money journals may have cornered the status market, but paywalls interfere with public performance and no longer function efficiently for reputation-building. That's why these big players are now big on open access – with hefty fees for making an article in a high-prestige journal open (\$5,000 is in the ballpark) or smaller fees for publishing in new mega-journals busy churning out stuff. Being big helps – they already have the infrastructure, and they're pivoting because that's where the market is going. People want their stuff not just published and locked up – they want it public.

Roger Schonfeld has written about [why the Bepress acquisition made sense for Elsevier](#) and why [libraries' inability to think strategically](#) about the future is a serious leadership flaw. In recent decades, shortly after libraries used new technologies to share cataloging work in new ways and make interlibrary-loan infinitely more efficient, publishers got into the technology-for-sharing act and libraries grew used to shifting from ownership of collections to access, leaving the development of tech infrastructure to others. We traded rights we'd had in exchange for access to more stuff. We also grew used to patrolling our borders, because that was part of the deal, and we got less practiced at working together to meet common needs.

Now, as scholars and scientists grow impatient with paywalls, we're in danger of ceding the future to the biggest for-profit publishers if we don't come up with alternatives. And here's where, for me, things get sticky.

Not many libraries, regardless of who leads them, are in a position to shift the enterprise from a local focus to a fully outward-facing one. MIT is certainly giving it a go, and so is Michigan, but we'd need a groundswell among wildly diverse institutions to pool funding and vision to build

something that is public but not ours, something that isn't simply a response to the demands being made of us at home. We're really good at service to our communities and we have a set of strong shared values, but we're kind of terrible at saying "hold my beer: we can solve that big hairy world-wide problem." Not all libraries have been able to develop tech talent – partly because of the hands-tied thing but also because library culture isn't always kind to people with those talents. And let's be real: scholars and scientists resist solutions that are library-based. They don't see us in that role and selling them on the idea that we're going to lead the change would be a difficult challenge.

What I think might be our best strategy is to play to our strengths – service (including willingness to organize and sustain things) and values – while supporting in every way we can open access to knowledge that is consistent with our values. We may or may not be the ones who write the code and build the new platforms, but we can get going by strategically redirecting our resources on those projects that are promising – arXiv, the new preprint servers springing up, Humanities Commons, etc. – while making sure access doesn't get sold as a nifty way to amplify reputations and enhance productivity for a price.

Schonfeld thinks libraries are too focused on content, not scholarly workflows, and recommends leadership training that focuses on strategy and business development. Leadership is something I'm skeptical about simply because don't think librarians are positioned to lead this change so much as to support it vigorously and guide it gently. I'm also not sure I would call this "business development" but rather development of a financially sustainable and morally responsible approach to doing the things we care about using our skills and resources and convictions. Maybe the shorthand for those things these days is "business" (given how much planning things that will cost money is now called "developing a business model") but I like to think librarians and scholars are increasingly ready for something radically different from business as usual.

A Necessary Footnote

August 31, 2017

So, there's currently a garbage fire happening in the library community. It's like one of those landfill fires that smolders underground and pops up to the surface now and again and people rush around trying to put it out, bumping into each other, arguing about how to handle it, quoting policies at each other. By the time I finish writing this, it may be put out for a while, but not for long. It's a big underground fire, and it's right under our feet.

Here's the conundrum in a nutshell. If you want your library to be welcoming to all, you can't invite into it people who want to publicly announce that they want to drive away some of them with torches and threats. You can't invite people into your library so they can announce "guess what, you're *not* welcome here, and we want you gone." You can't give these folks that platform in hopes that we'll all understand their perspectives better so we can reason with them and maybe change their minds. That's not what they want. They want a library where some people are not welcome. They can reason you into exhaustion, but what they really want is to tear down that "everyone is welcome here" sign and drive out people they have selected for expulsion.

So when you say "everyone is welcome here" you kind of have to add a footnote: "except people who demand that other people leave."

This is not to say their viewpoints can't be explored in a library. You can have books that unpack why some people want other people gone. You can even have books *by* people who want other people gone. You can put them on a shelf next to books about the civil right movement or reparations for the descendants of people who were kidnapped and enslaved and flames won't spontaneously break out. You can argue with a book, but it won't gather a crowd to physically threaten you. You can rub ideas together until they ignite, but they can't get together and march with torches. People don't dress up like soldiers and carry weapons through the stacks to protect free speech. That would be stupid. Scaring other people into silence is not how you protect free speech. We can protect speech without violence, without making anyone feel unwelcome.

Except for the ones who only want to come inside to tell others to get

out. They have chosen to exclude themselves by declaring the category “everyone” something they reject.

The Black Box Problem

November 13, 2017

There's [another fascinating study](#) out from the Stanford History Education Group, the folks who studied high school and college students' capacity to figure out what news is fake, finding that they don't really know how to do that. Turns out – surprise! – trained historians don't really know how to do that, either. Historians tend to focus on critiquing textual evidence, unlike trained fact checkers who immediately confirm and corroborate with other sources, something the report calls “reading laterally.” No doubt historians would have gotten the answers eventually, but on a timed test, close reading didn't work as well as lateral reading. We rely too much on training and trust.

This reminds me of [an article](#) Marc Meola published more than a decade ago, urging librarians to stop using a source evaluation checklist with students (CRAAP is a classic – determine currency, relevance, accuracy, authority, purpose) without also including the lateral part. Can you confirm claims in another source? How does this source fit in with what you're finding elsewhere? What do experts say? If you don't already know that a well-dressed website or an article full of footnotes is a front for a fringe group known for playing fast and loose with facts, the site (or the article) certainly won't let you in on it. So read around. See how this information fits with other sources.

But “other sources” can be tricky, too, if we don't get out of our social silos. As Kris Shaffer explains in a handy article listing “[10 Ways to Get Started Fighting Internet Propaganda](#),” we tend to trust people we know, and social media is built on trust relationships. We may miss ideas that aren't entertained by our friends and friends-of-friends. We might also come across disinformation that has been alchemically transformed into misinformation when a friend of a friend of a friend innocently shared something that started out as malicious propaganda but somewhere along the line was taken on its face. We can't spend hours checking out everything we encounter. Fact-checking has to be a collaborative and social process. Learn who to trust, look for patterns, and make sure you don't share something you aren't sure is true. (Some of Shaffer's ten ways involve APIs, scraping websites, and analyzing multiple network relationships using Python, duct tape, and magic spells. He lost me after the first five or so, but

even halved it's a good set of strategies.) We have to somehow identify the limits of our networks, read laterally, and practice humility when we aren't sure.

Okay. But what I'm wrestling with is helping students learn how to make up their minds when there's so much information coming at us and so many machines are trying to make up our minds for us. A few stories from the past couple of weeks make me wonder what we can possibly mean by "information literacy" given the way we live now.

- Twitter, which hasn't yet made any money, knows it's overrun by bots and won't confront the problem because it could hurt its already shaky business model. Twitter's libertarian business philosophy makes it both easy to manipulate and resistant to accountability. It also gives shady operators the opportunity to create countless fake accounts and erase its activity at will, thwarting anyone who wants to know what's going on. (["Why Twitter is the Best Social Media Platform for Disinformation"](#) by Thomas Rid at *Motherboard*.)
- Where do you turn for the latest news, if not to Twitter? Years ago Google became so dominant it became a verb meaning "to find out." In the hours journalists take to craft the first draft of history, propagandists and mischief-makers rush in with garbage. We may get impatient waiting for the story (how many times can CNN anchors babble about what they don't know and haven't confirmed?) but Google gives you answers right away. They probably came from Twitter, and they may be parodies or hoaxes or serious attempts at misleading people. In the absence of good content, Google takes what content it can get, and so we learn all kinds of wrong things about breaking events. (["Google's Mass-Shooting Misinformation Problem"](#) by Alexis Madrigal at *The Atlantic*.)
- A pox on these platforms! you may think. I just won't use them. That won't stop you being used by *them*. I don't have a Facebook account, but Facebook knows all kinds of information about me because they buy personal information from data brokers, they know where I've been when I visit a page with a "like us on Facebook" button, they use facial recognition to identify me on photos people upload, and they use their "people you may know" algorithm to scoop up information from

contacts people have for me on their laptops or phones. That's an extraordinary amount of personal data, and it's not mine. I don't have a Facebook profile, but they can profile me anyway. Only those who sign up and create profiles can edit them, and even they can't see the bits that were added because of the "people you may know" algorithm. Why can't we control that information about us? Facebook claims that would be a privacy violation. Sigh. (["How Facebook Figures Out Everyone You've Ever Met"](#) by Kashmir Hill at Gizimodo.)

I'm getting ready to meet with yet another group of first semester students. They'll spend a little time exploring the library and learning some things about the internet and how to recognize the kinds of information they'll be expected to use in academic writing for the next four years. I hope they learn something valuable, but I'm feeling sheepish about calling this sort of learning "information literacy." I've been doing this for thirty years. Though technology has altered libraries and publishing in those decades, until this year I thought the fundamentals students needed to know – how to frame a question, how to think critically about what you find, how to weigh divergent arguments and create your own with a sense of integrity – were basically unchanging. But the world we've found ourselves in now, one where we're being given personalized bodies of knowledge created by propagandists and bots and artificial intelligence, all locked up in corporate black boxes – I don't even know where to start.

The Term Paper Perplex

December 13, 2017

Ah, the perennial problem: why do we assign term papers? (Or research papers, if that's what you call them.) The battle that [has been fought](#) and forgotten and [fought](#) again [since at least 1982](#), and probably longer. That problem we're wondering about between bouts of grading papers that turned out worse than expected.

I like the suggestions [Deborah J. Cohan makes in her recent essay here](#) – give students occasions to write about things they care about, make connections, and reflect on something they've learned rather than assign a long paper using sources they have little time or capacity to read and citing them using arcane rules that are rarely used outside academic settings. Too much of students' attention goes into finding stuff to quote and organizing references, too little into communicating their ideas clearly. And hey, wouldn't life be better if we didn't have to spend hours and hours this time of year correcting errors when it's too late just to assign a grade?

There are several different issues here. One is how to most effectively help student learn to write. Not to write just for college assignments, but to write for different reasons in different settings. The folks in writing studies have been thinking about this for a long time. They know a lot about this. There are scholars who do serious research on this very subject on most of our campuses. We should ask them what works. In my experience, they have great ideas.

Another issue that is going to be on the minds of my library colleagues is how will students learn to find and evaluate information themselves if they aren't given assignments that ask them to develop their own questions and make choices among sources on their own. This, like writing, is a skill and disposition that matters beyond college. I'm pretty sure there are librarians on your campus who could give you a lot of advice about how to give students opportunities to practice asking questions, finding things out, and learning to make sound judgements about sources. I guarantee that advice is very unlikely to be “assign more research papers.”

A third issue raised by Cohan's essay is how to effectively give students feedback that can help them learn. Handing back a marked-up term paper pointing out errors when it's too late to do anything about them doesn't

work very well and it's a lot of work for little learning. Those writing studies scholars on your campus that I mentioned? They have good ideas about feedback on writing that works. Ask them.

I'm not sure why certain practices that frustrate teachers and students are so deeply ingrained in our everyday practice. We have decades of research about these practices. We have writing instructors and librarians who know a thing or two about how to create occasions for learning that are not term papers, but because they don't have much status at their institutions, and everyone is too busy to ask, anyway, the college writing course and the library instruction program have to prepare students to do things that we know don't work for teachers who hate grading papers but keep assigning them anyway.

Having said that, a lot of what I remember from my college classes came from the digging around that I did to write my papers. I actually enjoyed writing papers. But I was a little weird.

Learning how to write well is important. Learning how to find stuff out is important. Believing it's worth our time to find stuff out and not simply believe the information we encounter is incredibly important. Being able to tell students how they're doing with their reading and writing and thinking and how they could do better is important, too. Why do we have to keep discovering anew that term papers are not the best way to do these things for many if not most of our students?

The good news is that there are almost certainly people on your campus – the writing folks, the librarians, the best teachers in your own departments – who have given this a lot of thought and can propose good alternatives to that assignment you may be grading right now. Better yet, open up the discussion in your departments and programs so you can think about how students learn to do these things in a sequence of experiences that makes sense. Students can learn a lot by doing extensive research on a topic – but that's not what they're doing when a generic term paper is simply assigned out of habit.

Gorilla Theatre

January 17, 2018

I enjoyed reading [John Warner's recent confessional](#) – he was very nearly fooled for a moment by the “gorilla television” prank. Many people were fooled, because we’ve become accustomed to believing six impossible tweets before breakfast.* There are at least a couple of things going on – confirmation bias (it fits a pattern of shock and outrage many of us have been feeling about this president and confirms our sense that this is not normal and not right). The other is decontextualization. If you don’t know the person who tweeted is joking, and it comes to you in a stream of weary horror about the state of the world (“let that sink in” is a the new OMG in Twitterland), it’s just further proof that we’re in the handbasket and it’s getting much warmer. John suggests, and I heartily endorse this idea, that we should be starting our discussions of information literacy in the first year *right here*, not with how to find peer reviewed research for college writing. I’ve thought this for years.

Because I am as old as dirt, I remember when faculty who never really bought into information literacy as a valuable use of class time suddenly wanted library sessions. They noticed students were using websites in their research and were choosing them unwisely. Suddenly it was important that we have a discussion of how to tell good information from bad. (Somehow picking books off the shelf unwisely was an entirely different problem – to faculty, but not to students.) Some of these sudden converts were perfectly upfront about why this was a job for librarians. They weren’t familiar enough with the web to guide that discussion. I sense a similar dread right now, thanks concern about “fake news.” Students need to know how to think about this torrent of misinformation, propaganda, tilted news, disinformation, and clickbait. But someone who is confident about guiding students to good scholarly information may feel just as unprepared as students when it comes to knowing how to recognize these things as our information landscape undergoes rapid and unpredictable tectonic shifts. Our [usual scholarly methods don’t work](#) very well.

The thing is, this is the world our students will graduate into. Learning how to find peer-reviewed articles won’t help students figure out if a gorilla-television claim is true. Isolating part of our information landscape and labeling it “high quality” is not only [misleading](#), it fails to make a case for why

that sort of information matters in a world where most of the information we encounter every day is published and shared under different rules. Academic scholarship can help us understand our world. As a method of inquiry it's valuable and findings are often significant beyond a small circle of experts. If students graduate thinking of peer-reviewed research as a thing that only matters in academic circles, that it's good "because I say so," we've done them an injustice. We're also not even touching on how to know how to interpret a bit of satire in a tweet. Why aren't we following John's advice and teaching this stuff as a preface to "here's what scholars do to resolve questions"? Because it's not our expertise. Because we know the literature of our field, not the current and rapidly morphing world of instant information. Because, like when the web was new, we're just as confused as our students. *But this really matters!*

As I did my morning "what's going on in the world?" routine, I noticed two stories that seem related to this issue. (Hat tip to [Note to Self](#) – both were in their newsletter, though on any given day, I'm likely to find articles that pertain to this issue.) [One is about](#) the design flaws that led to that horrifying incoming missile alert texted to everyone in Hawaii, sending them scrambling for cover. I happened to see that alert shortly after it went out. A CNN reporter in Hawaii tweeted it out and someone I follow retweeted it. We turned on the television (sports in progress, nothing on the crawl to indicate breaking news) and I checked other news outlets online – all of which were strangely silent. Within a few minutes I assumed this was a mistake or a hack – that was more than a half-hour before the correction went out from official channels. People in Hawaii didn't have that luxury, since the message went out on news channels as well as texted to their phones. Apparently it was a goof due to terrible interface design, something that should have been obvious, but the people expected to use that system probably felt was out of their control, just something they had to work around. How often do we feel helpless about the technology we're forced to use? How often do we see its flaws but feel we have no way of fixing them? How often do we not even know what's going on under the hood, how decisions are being made by designers and their algorithms? How much trust do we place in unknowable technology? Do you know how your search is being shaped by Google? Do you have any idea how one post gets to your Facebook feed? Those information decisions are trade secrets and nobody at the other end is listening.

The [other story](#) is a brief follow-up to a notorious bungle. Two years ago,

someone noticed Google was algorithmically labeling dark-skinned people as “gorillas” in their automated photo tagging. Google immediately apologized and began working on a fix. [Wired](#) decided to see how it’s going. The fix, apparently, is to simply omit labels for this class of animals, thus avoiding the technological problem. This is a bit like [Facebook’s decision](#) to fix their “fake news” problem by making it harder to get news on Facebook, to focus instead on puppies and family picnics. (They also haven’t fixed their advertising system to [prevent illegal discrimination](#) despite their claims, and their [enforcement of hate speech prohibitions](#) is pretty iffy.) Things get broken, and we get workarounds rather than real solutions. Real solutions would take real work.

Who ever knew this could be so hard? Most of us who deal in information – journalists, academics, librarians. So long as these information systems are designed primarily to gather personal data, seize attention, and sell ads, we will be struggling through this massive swamp, trying to figure out what to believe. That has never been easy, but the sheer volume we encounter today makes it far more difficult. If we start students out thinking about to make reasoned decisions about this kind of information, the kind they are used to seeing every day, there’s a chance they’ll be better prepared to think about how academic research is designed and vetted and why those processes matter. And if we hesitate because we don’t understand this messy world, we’d better figure it out, and soon.

*John has inspired me to add a footnote. This *Through the Looking-Glass* passage between Alice and the White Queen seems unusually apt these days:

“I can’t believe that!” said Alice.

“Can’t you?” the Queen said in a pitying tone. “Try again: draw a long breath, and shut your eyes.”

Alice laughed. “There’s no use trying,” she said: “one *can’t* believe impossible things.”

“I daresay you haven’t had much practice,” said the Queen. “When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I’ve believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.”

Are We There Yet?

January 22, 2018

As I was idly poking into library history, I came across something that surprised me. In a [1901 conference proceeding](#), Melvil Dewey predicted this would happen by 1926:

Books, except a few rarities, will be regarded less as fetiches [sic] to-be protected with a kind of sacred awe, and more for use. When a volume cost as much as a village, this reverence and jealous watchfulness were justified. Now that it can be bought for the price of a single meal, such reverence is a mediaeval survival. Students will cut up books freely for notes and scraps.

Librarians are known to quote Ranganathan's laws, including "Books are for use" but this is going a bit far.

The context for this prediction: there were hot debates going on about whether libraries should allow browsing in open stacks. Those who supported the idea argued that books were no longer so special, rare, and sacred that they had to be protected from the public. Or even, apparently, from vandalism.

Dewey, in addition to being an anti-Semite and harasser of women, was a serial entrepreneur fascinated with business and big ideas. He wanted libraries to be efficient, cost-effective, and (though they didn't use the term back then) a good return on investment. He had plenty to say about how to run libraries – including that bookish people need not apply, but rather libraries should be directed by "men of affairs" who would "throw into their work the same administrative skill that has made possible the successes of the captains of industry and commerce."

The entire essay is in many ways fascinating in that so many of his predictions seem fairly current:

- Access to information matters more than ownership
- New technologies should be harnessed to provide information services (he was really excited about telephones)
- Since it's fruitless to try to own everything libraries should reduce their collections to items that get lots of use and cooperate with large

research libraries to preserve print collections.

- Libraries and universities should become involved in academic publishing
- Libraries are more than just books (he thought libraries should provide illustrations, which could be more informative than texts, and include museums; no mention of 3D printers, though)

One prediction that goes against the current grain: he thought reference services would be big. That was once true, but has faded as basic information is readily available online.

Respondents to Dewey's paper were interested if not entirely convinced. One thought browsing was fine, so long as young people were limited to really good books selected and arranged for them. Another said "I am inclined to think that the present cheapness and the greater cheapness of books hereafter is not in itself a great public benefit . . . so much miscellaneous reading enthralls and paralyzes the power of thought." A third said "I should like to hear competent persons discuss the question of fictitious literature in the library. Is there any way of limiting it? . . . If a free library has an enormous supply of works of fiction, and any child old enough to read can go and help himself, not from the shelves, of course, but by the ordinary methods, and can do this as often as he pleases, is it on the whole desirable? Should there not be some check?" There followed much discussion of the misleading nature of library circulation statistics, dominated by novels which "demoralize the intellect." That was another big debate of the time along with open stacks.

Anyway, fun stuff and a reminder that we have always been talking about the future of libraries.

From Schooled Skepticism to Informed Trust

February 27, 2018

As I mentioned last week, Mike Caulfield has written a handy (and free!) [classroom-ready book](#) about fact-checking and provides [useful case studies](#) for students and anyone who wants to fine-tune their bullshit detector. Also, he has [explained why](#) simply studying a document for clues (a checklist approach) doesn't work and four moves you can make instead: corroborate, trace the story's origin, confirm (aka "read laterally"), and don't get stuck in a rabbit hole ("circle back"). I have to also give a tip of the hat to Marc Meola who [made a very similar point](#) back in 2004, though we didn't need it quite so badly back then.

The catch is that some folks have calibrated their bullshit detectors to click loudly if the source of information appears to be afflicted with MSM syndrome. It's mainstream, so it must be liberal. Or as the president likes to call it, "fake news." These are news organizations that use gatekeepers, also known as new editors, and their job limits individual freedom to make up your own mind so that makes them all automatically the enemy of the people. The real people, not the people who are the enemy so don't count as people. Fact-checking sites like Snopes also set off these calibrated detectors because it finds too often the facts aren't fake and the fakes aren't fact.

Caulfield has since addressed this problem in "[Media Literacy Is About Where To Spend Your Trust. But You Have To Spend It Somewhere.](#)" It's not that hard to get students to doubt. In fact, quite a lot of higher education is training in doubt. We critique, we take apart, we don't take it for granted. We test our hypotheses. We reverse engineer ideas until bits of it are all over the floor. This means we're better at distrust than trust. I've certainly experienced this problem when having students look at radically different conclusions drawn from primary sources or when pointing out how peer review processes are hardly fool-proof. Great, so now we can't trust anything? Well, you have to trust some things, and luckily some people are more likely to use ethical and well-tested methods to arrive at conclusions

than other people, whether in journalism, science, policy-setting, or simply making a decision.

If William Perry's [1968 study](#) that developed a model of intellectual development still holds water, college students in their late adolescence/early adulthood are at about the right age to be a living, breathing shrug emoji. They're past thinking things are clearly right or wrong. They've moved into a confusing time when everything is suspect. If nothing can be absolutely right, how are you supposed to trust anything? Isn't it all a matter of opinion? Eventually, if things go well, they are able to commit to some things being more right than others, which is an epistemic shift – there are ways we can come to believe what we think is most likely right, which is not exactly the same as being able to think critically. It's actually gaining trust in particular ways of knowing and caring enough to weigh options fairly.

This passage from the 1968 report jumped out at me, describing students in the relativistic phase.

Under stress (of fear, anger, extreme moral arousal, or simple overburden of complexity) it is possible to take refuge in the all-or-none forms of early dualism. At this point reactive adherence to Authority (the “reactionary”) requires violent repudiation of otherness and of complexity. Similarly, reactive opposition to Authority (the “dogmatic rebel”) requires an equally absolutistic rejection of any “establishment.” Threatened by a proximate challenge, this entrenchment can call forth in its defense hate, projection, and denial of all distinctions but one. In this structure of extreme proprietary “rightness,” others may be perceived as so wrong and bad as to have no “rights,” and violence is justified against them.

Retreat is rare in our records [of the research project] and where it occurs it cannot be illustrated by concise excerpts. In recent years its structure is exemplified vividly in the forms of thought of the extreme “radical” left in student revolt. These forms may be examined in the statements of the “radical” as opposed to the “liberal” students . . . The forms are of course identical with those employed by persons and groups of the extreme radical right.

Certainly young folks in 1968 were facing stress and questioning authority, but retreat into dualism isn't rare anymore and it's not just a youth thing.

What's different today is our engines of epistemic reasoning are engineered by advertising technology. We Google it. We heard about it on Facebook or Twitter. We saw it on Instagram or YouTube. Every single one of those sources of information has an algorithmic editor, but this editor, unlike a traditional news editor, has no interest in news value and no wall separates him from the business side. In fact, he works only for the business side and will deny he's in the news business at all. He's only interested in ad placement, and he doesn't even see what news is being shared because it's happening so fast and hey, it's not his problem. He only cares about the code; it's not his content, just his assembly of it.

The effect of this editorial work, though, has created an alternative news universe full of alternative facts and links to like-minded alternative "news" outlets and it's all very profitable and all very ripe for mischief in the service of power and money.

We need to teach how to trust as much as we need to teach fact-checking. We can't simplify things by saying "it's peer reviewed" or "it's from a major national newspaper" or "it's from a university press" or "that's from a scholarly society, so it's good." Peer review [fails](#). National newspapers of quality get it [spectacularly wrong](#). The recent shenanigans of the IEEE shows why trusting quality brands is problematic. First, in a Twitter post an "outreach historian" for the professional organization [casually](#) and sloppily discredited an African-American scholar's work without reading it, then the organization first denied the historian (who apologized) was authorized to speak (though that was actually his job) and [deleted](#) the record of the dispute (not a good look for institutional history), then the society published a plagiarized article and [removed](#) it for review rather than acknowledge the problem . . . aaand it doesn't help that the organization that insulted the work of two women scholars [has a 90 percent](#) male membership. There are any number of examples of highly respected organizations and publishers behaving badly. Information isn't trustworthy simply because of its brand. (An aside: this is why using Journal Impact Factor to evaluate the quality of an article or an author is so bogus.)

Teaching trust means teaching the cultures and practices of good scholarship and good journalism and providing students with opportunities to practice honest, ethical listening and thinking about things that don't have singular right answers but have ones that are demonstrably wrong. We also need to explain the ways our adtech-driven information systems actually

work and how they are corrupting our common knowledge. I don't see any way around it.

You can't administer a trust vaccine in a fifty-minute library session. Where should this work happen? How do we make sure it *does* happen?

Lessons from the Facebook Fiasco

April 15, 2018

“Privacy is essential to the exercise of free speech, free thought, and free association. . . . The library profession has a long-standing commitment to an ethic of facilitating, not monitoring, access to information.” [Privacy: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights](#), 2001-2002.

“We protect each library user’s right to privacy and confidentiality with respect to information sought or received and resources consulted, borrowed, acquired or transmitted.” American Library Association [Code of Ethics](#) Adopted 1939, last amended 2008.

It was interesting to learn about a new product designed to personalize the library experience for public library patrons shortly after watching Mark Zuckerberg being grilled by members of Congress. Thanks to [a Twitter thread](#) posted by Becky Yoose, a systems librarian who works for a large public library, I now know OCLC, a global library cooperative based in the US, best known for its shared catalog WorldCat, has acquired [Wise](#), a subsystem for what librarians call an “ILS” – an integrated library system that combines the catalog with library functions such as keeping track of who has checked out what. This new system will do much more – in a sense, cataloging library users and tying their interests to library materials and programs through marketing.

Librarians like to think privacy is an essential feature of freedom of inquiry, and keeping track of what you’ve read in the past once you’ve returned a book is none of our business, even if it makes us seem less convenient or user-friendly than all of the other systems that remember things for us. It’s too bad that we can’t tell you whether you’ve read John Sanford’s *Extreme Prey* already. (It’s understandably hard to keep track when all 26 books in the series have the word “prey” in the title.) That inconvenience is outweighed by possibility that your reading history could be used to hurt you or another of our library users. Reading should never be used as evidence against you – and the freedom to read widely shouldn’t be chilled by concerns that your reading records may be stored and used against your will.

Sure, we were scorned by officials after 9/11 who said “the government

doesn't care about what James Patterson novel you read" and "if you haven't done anything wrong, you don't have anything to hide." Well, I've written articles about sexual violence and serial murder in crime fiction. Some of my reading records could look mighty suspicious if someone suspected I was up to no good. What if what you've been reading was obtained and published by someone who had a grudge and wanted to publicly provoke a reaction? Could get messy. Luckily, that can't happen if those records aren't kept.

That said, a lot of librarians think library privacy is an outdated, slightly ridiculous obsession, given literally billions of people have signed up for social media platforms and are used to getting algorithmic recommendations. Aren't libraries letting our patrons down if we don't personalize our information offerings algorithmically? Won't we seem useless and outdated?

(An aside: in academic libraries, where demonstrating value is considered a survival skill, this is more frequently framed as tracking individual use of the library to promote "student success," enabling us to intervene if a student isn't connecting to the library. After all, there's evidence students with high GPAs use the library, thank goodness – it shows we have value and therefore should be allowed to exist. But what about students who don't use the library? I've been told I'm forcing my personal values on innocent students who may be harmed if I don't keep track of whether and how they use library resources. To which I say there are non-invasive ways of reaching out to struggling students and ethical ways to study library effectiveness that don't involve gathering piles of sensitive data and asking it to do it for us.)

Anyway, this new product being offered to public libraries in the US after a successful debut in the Netherlands will allow libraries to enhance patron profiles, tying what they like to read and programs they are interested in to demographic data, such as their age, gender, and residence. This is both to personalize the library experience and to make the library more valuable to the public. (A [Dutch site](#) describing the product opens with "'Falling loan figures. Falling visitor numbers. The customer is increasingly central" and goes on to say "By following the behavior of your customer, you have a wealth of information. With the Wise marketing module you can edit and use this data for different marketing purposes." Anxiety stick, followed by a marketing carrot.) Public libraries have programs for job seekers, for the homeless, for people with various medical issues, for immigrants learning English or applying for green cards. What we haven't done is connect that

information into their patron records. But we could, to better personalize the customer experience!

According to [a press release](#) “OCLC takes data privacy very seriously. OCLC does not sell users’ personal data. Wise and other OCLC products make use of personal data only within the context of providing the library services that our members and their users have agreed to.”

I’ve heard this somewhere before . . . where was it? . . . oh, yeah, that’s what Zuckerberg said, over and over, to members of Congress. We don’t sell data. We care about privacy. Users agreed to it. And there was his weird insistence that it was all in order to serve the “Facebook community” as if there is a singular community of over two billion people who want their lives improved by seeing highly personalized advertising, that this is all about bringing us closer together by amassing and using personal information for “customer relationship management” through segmentation.

OCLC, I have discovered, has registered the service mark, “because what is known must be shared.” No. Really. It doesn’t.

Perhaps even more distressing to me is that OCLC describes this product as an analytics tool that “removes subjectivity” because its decisions about people involve data and computers. That seems shockingly uninformed for an information organization. Let me share some reading materials voluntarily, just as I have tagged myself as “interested in privacy” right here of my own free will. I’m sure there’s lots I’ve missed, but these come immediately to mind.

- [Algorithms of Oppression](#) by Safiya Noble
- [Automating Inequality](#) by Virginia Eubanks
- [Cyber Racism](#) by Jessie Daniels
- [Weapons of Math Destruction](#) by Cathy O’Neil
- [Data and Goliath](#) by Bruce Schneier
- And for academic librarians particularly, this C&RL article by Kyle M. L. Jones and Dorothea Salo, “[Learning Analytics and the Academic Library](#).”

Algorithms don’t remove subjectivity. This is basic professional knowledge. The trouble Facebook is in should be making us more cautious, less easily persuaded that our salvation lies in gathering more user data. I’m not sure who to blame for blithely embracing market-segmentation “personalization” systems – OCLC or members of my profession for thinking surveillance

capitalism is the model we should follow in spite of what we know and what we purport to value.

Access Means More than Abundance

June 26, 2018

When I made an informal survey of academic library mission statements a few years ago, access and service were the two values most commonly mentioned. Now that we're practically drowning in information, why is access still so commonly named as a library's primary purpose?

On average, [over 6,000 scientific articles](#) are published daily. [Over 6,000 books](#) are published, not counting those that are self-published. That's just the tip of the content iceberg. Every day, according to various estimates, [1.45 billion people log into Facebook](#) to share photos and links. [Half a billion Tweets are sent](#). [A billion hours of video content are watched on YouTube](#). Google responds to [over 3 billion search requests](#) using the 130 trillion webpages it has indexed. Meanwhile libraries have steeply reduced their acquisition of books and are beginning to let go of journal bundles. ([Sweden](#) just told Elsevier where to get off, and [others here and abroad](#) are deciding Big Deals are bad deals.) With all this abundance, combined with austerity in library budgets and expanding productivity demands made on everyone, what does information access even mean?

I remember when the web seemed vaguely threatening to some librarians and a great many faculty. Early on it was all about trust – was the information you found online any good? How could you tell? Then it got competitive. How could librarians make their systems simpler to use? What were we going to do about the fact that most people no longer started their search at the library but on Google? How could libraries argue for their relevance given the ubiquity of one of the most world's most powerful corporations?

In the 19th century access was a value that drove the founding of public libraries – making books and newspapers available to all in hopes of improving individuals and society. Early on it was called “the library faith” – that broad exposure to knowledge would lead to better lives and a stronger society. What does that faith mean when we're so saturated with information?

When I started working with undergraduates three decades ago it was

understood that we had a limited collection, and for most purposes it would do. That's no longer the case. Students are doing more research at a more advanced level, faculty research expectations have soared, the amount published is dizzying, and while we have systems to get you pretty much anything you desire it feels a bit as if we're concierges arranging rentals, most often from five profitable multinationals. Of course some folks are in such a hurry they turn to [shadow libraries](#)* like SciHub, which have vast stores of articles and don't ask for credentials. And that, too, feels threatening to librarians who have heard too often "why do we even need libraries when you can just Google it?"

Librarians are caught in that strange in-between place of wanting to take seriously "free to all" by fighting for open access to scholarship while in reality spending most of their time and money in rental transactions. What if we become wildly successful with open access and funding models evolved so sharing scholarship was frictionless and free? Would we all just Google it? Would that be the ultimate access?

Well . . . there are some issues with that scenario. Google is in the advertising business, and to increase their revenue, they need to hold our attention and tailor ads to our profiles. They call it "improving the customer experience." I call bullshit. When we rely on monopolistic tech corporations for our access, we're letting them decide who gets to see what. Increasingly, we're allowing them to answer our questions – not showing us a range of options, but telling us via a voice assistant or highlighting in a box the answer, usually a bit of text from Wikipedia or some other high-traffic source, giving it great authority. Even if we ignore that singular answer, it's unlikely we'll go past the first page of results, and the algorithm for choosing what shows up first is a trade secret, constantly changing to outfox the optimization industry that has sprung up to push pages higher. Library systems for cataloging and shelving books are far from perfect, but at least they are transparent, and they don't assume the point is to find one simple answer.

When we search, we have a variety of self-directed goals that will influence our path. We might be looking for a data set or a particular book or we've heard about or there's a theory we want to explore in the context of some idea we're testing. In a Google search everything – a news story, a hobby site, stuff for sale, an opinion piece, a bit of fabricated rage – is jumbled together with the idea that you'll find an answer, just like going to a big box store to find a product. Knowledge doesn't lend itself to that kind

of get-in-and-get-out search style. Without context, without being able to discern connections and relationships, we have abundance, but that's not the same as access.

Another thing to bear in mind is that these systems are vast and global but have no sense of local culture and how meaning is made.** They are forced to make some legal concessions because content that crosses international borders runs into national laws, but that's about all the accommodation made to cope with the fact that it's a very big world after all. A lot of folks access information through Facebook these days. The global implications are massive. Facebook is deploying walled-garden internet access in developing countries, providing "free" access to Facebook and a few other platforms chosen by Facebook, all watched over by local bureaucrats protecting their power. Facebook's leadership has a highly unsophisticated understanding of what happens when you provide people with tools that allow communication but are designed to amplify the most attention-seeking material to sell attention to advertisers. You encourage [genocide](#) and apologize after it's too late. You take payment for US political ads in rubles and only later admit that could be problematic. You get ignorant technological "fixes" that [can't tell the difference](#) between a political campaign ad and a news story.

Then there's the fact that this abundance is unevenly distributed. We're all familiar with the unaffiliated researcher lacking access to articles unless they can pay quite a lot for each one they want to examine, but internet access itself is costly. [Nearly half](#) of Americans who are low income, minority, or live in rural areas lack broadband internet service at their homes even as it becomes more vital for education and nearly everything else. The percentage of Americans who [rely on phones](#) as their connection to the internet is significantly higher among African-Americans and still higher among Latinos than among whites. If you're poor, there's a good chance you'll run short on your data plans before the end of the month, and at times you'll have to cancel service altogether because it's access or food. This is reality for many of our students. When we assume putting information online makes it accessible, we're not giving it enough thought.

Libraries lately have been reflecting on how they can confront their own limits. Our classification systems reflect a vision of the world that favors Western, Christian culture; our purported inclusiveness is problematic when the profession is as white as it is. We're struggling to make more information free to the world, but often without adequate reflection about how our

advocacy for openness might strengthen the grip of the very companies that got us into this dilemma of unaffordable but profitable abundance.

What should “free to all” look like today? Is there a way to make knowledge public without it being channeled through a handful of profit-making companies from the US and Europe? I’ve said before that if we tried to invent free publicly-supported libraries today it would seem outlandish. Yet we did, and we got started during the first Gilded Age. During this one, we should expand “free to all” to shape the information systems that dominate our lives.

Not easy, I know, but important.

*This new book looks like an extremely valuable contribution to understanding scholarship from a global perspective. Bonus points: it’s open access.

**I just started reading [*Whose Global Village*](#) by Ramesh Srinivasan and look forward to being a good deal smarter by the time I finish.

It's the Attention Economy, and It's Stupid

July 4, 2018

This coda to [my last blog post](#) is, in part, inspired by [John Warner's latest discussion](#) of replacing human teachers responding to writing with machines that can read for structure and grammar but not for meaning, because meaning is not required to prove you can write. (In fact, according to the people selling this program, being able to write nonsense according to formula is proof you can write well! As if writing and meaning are separate categories.)

It's also inspired by [a piece in the New Yorker](#) about people who believe the earth is flat and have the evidence to prove it – because there's an abundance of evidence to prove just about anything you want, right now, and being able to “do the research yourself” is somehow affirming, a form of liberty. You don't have to trust traditional authorities. You can find the truth yourself, online, and you'll find a community of people who will agree with you to confirm your free thought.

And this is probably also influenced by [a fascinating study](#) on how Evangelicals read the news the way they study the bible, recently discussed in a [Columbia Journalism Review](#) article.

Basically, access to information in abundance so you can find “evidence” for whatever you want isn't what's needed, it's access to good information and some sense of what you [can trust](#) – and that's where things get complicated. Where there are great divides about basic epistemology and a large number of public voices telling large numbers of people not to trust traditional institutions like journalism, science, or scholarly work, it's impossible to agree on what's “good.” And without trust we're just bumbling through thickets of stuff, much of it [stripped of context clues by aggregators](#). (If you aren't following [Mike Caulfield's work](#), I recommend it.)

And that's not all, as they used to say in the Veg-o-Matic ad. We have an information economy that depends on both volume and attention. That leaves traditional means of establishing truth (to the best of our knowledge) not only at a disadvantage, it pushes traditionalists to speed things up, increase their numbers, and jazz things up to get attention at the risk of

corrupting what we know and how we know. We're publishing so much science and scholarship today to prove we deserve jobs and grants that nobody has time read it. Every reporter is expected to file more stories 24/7 and add vid eo and maintain a social media presence, and those metrics are analyzed like goat entrails to discern your career's future. Who has time to do deep research or in-depth reporting or even to read and reflect with such high demands for churning out content? Who has the right to decide for us what to read if not the Feed, the algorithm, the app that's tugging at our sleeve demanding attention?

Oddly enough, librarians have been between this rock and hard place for a long, long time. One of the earliest debates in public libraries was about whether librarians or readers should determine the purpose of the library. Was it a place that would educate and elevate citizens with improving and educational material, or should readers have a say in what they wanted to read? Censorship of salacious, inflammatory, or unedifying material was common library practice for decades, though librarians quickly learned they wouldn't have much public support if they were too bossy about what the public should read. Curate books, but let readers choose, too.

The American Library Association formally rejected censorship when it adopted the [Library Bill of Rights](#) in 1939, which urges librarians to "provide materials and information presenting all points of view on current and historical issues." Written originally by a former journalist-turned-librarian in 1938, it has become foundational to librarians' identity. (But that was not always so. It's significant that when a professor of English literature implored librarians to speak out against book burning and censorship in Germany in 1933, the association decided not to take action. There's [an issue of Library Trends](#) that has a lot of interesting articles on the subject.)

This debate kept going. A major postwar study, the *Public Library Inquiry*, urged librarians to embrace a more useful role in society by serving businesses and policymakers instead of providing cheap thrills for the unwashed. The public continued to assert an interest in choosing their own reading. That debate exploded in the 1980s when "give 'em what they want" became a battle cry for those who defended purchasing multiple copies of high-demand books, scandalizing those who thought the library should stock the classics (which, of course, they still did, because some people still want to read Jane Austen and Charles Dickens). But public libraries began to take lessons from retail and it's now common for the public to be referred to as "customers."

In academic libraries, “give ‘em what they want” has also taken root in a combination of paying for access to pretty much any article ever published instead of owning things (a perfectly reasonable thing to do as journals go online and increase in number). Book curation is suffering from a crisis of both budgets and confidence. It turns out a lot of books librarians have bought over the years haven’t been checked out, so it seems reasonable to simply lease large collections of ebooks. You may not give ‘em what they want, but you give them plenty of choice and you’re not on the hook for choosing poorly.

[This is fine](#) in a world in which students who make completely false claims are deemed good writers by a machine that can recognize form but doesn’t care about meaning. When Facebook [removes a news article](#) with political content because machines can’t tell the difference between journalism and campaign ads but knows their brand is in trouble. When profitable local news organizations are being [harvested for parts by private equity firms](#) and the only way to survive is to appeal to the great engines of the new data economy fed by hidden auctions where “eyeballs” are bought and sold every second in a weird market of high-frequency attention trading. Access to our attention degrades the value of information as a way of making sense of the world.

Really paying attention takes time and judgment. If access to information is ever going to matter, it has to be decoupled from a demand for more, more, more productivity and more, more, more metrics of attention to feed the ravenous broken beast we’ve created.

Who's Welcome Here?

July 15, 2018

To continue [my posts](#) relating core library values to our broader information landscape, I am going to scramble them up a bit. I had intended to go alphabetically (an order that does not seem absolutely obvious and natural to many of our students – they probably have a point, there). But when the American Library Association adopted [a revision](#) to a statement about how intellectual freedom applies to meeting rooms it created a storm of discussion and anger, so it seemed right to skip right ahead to intellectual freedom and why this library value matters beyond libraries. And is no simple matter.

Intellectual freedom means librarians strive to represent all perspectives and resist censorship that's based on partisan or doctrinal disapproval or bias against a work's creator. That's pretty foundational for libraries, just as debating ideas freely is foundational to higher education.

There are a variety of ways this value plays out in libraries, and one of them is how you decide who gets to use public meeting rooms. There are two distinct issues at play, one legal, the other philosophical: public libraries are an arm of the government, so they must abide by the free speech rights established in the first amendment; also, librarians believe in free speech as a value. Both are open to interpretation, which is what makes case law and policy-writing so tricky. The revised policy wording that has caused such a lot of discussion is: "If a library allows charities, non-profits, and sports organizations to discuss their activities in library meeting rooms, then the library cannot exclude religious, social, civic, partisan political, or hate groups from discussing their activities in the same facilities."

Several ALA councilors who voted to approve this change are unhappy because the phrase "hate groups" was inserted late in the process during a national conference where a lot was going on and they missed that insertion. On first reading, I thought it was a warning: careful, you may open yourself up to legal liability if you don't word your policy carefully. Or maybe you should just not have meeting rooms available to the public after all. But it's combined with a philosophical stance. Who are we to deny Nazis, white supremacists, or the local chapter of Attack the People We Think Are Scum from sharing their ideas in these public spaces? How else will we understand

their perspectives and have civil debate? The problem, of course, is that a person who a group considers scum might see a poster for that event and think “there are going to be people in the library who want to attack me. I’d better avoid it.” Or a library employee who is in the category scum (according to that group) may well feel understandably vulnerable as people get together in their workplace to decide the best way to dispose of her.

[Another ALA document](#) states “Hate speech stops being just speech and becomes conduct when it targets a particular individual and includes behavior that interferes with a patron’s ability to use the library.” Oof, okay. I happen to think holding a meeting to discuss how to best eliminate a group I belong to is going to interfere with my ability to use the library, even when the group is simply saying “we’re coming on Wednesday.” It would seem to me philosophically sound to say something like “groups that, through their official statements, malign or promote hatred of groups of people based on race, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation or gender identity may not use the library’s meeting room.” Yes, I’m cribbing from the Southern Poverty Law Center. Whether that restriction would be legal, I don’t know, because I’m not a lawyer. Philosophically? I’m good with putting some clear limits on speech that targets entire groups and threatens violence. That doesn’t mean individuals who are group members couldn’t use the library so long as they don’t bother others, and I might have some books on the shelves that explain their thinking, but gathering in the library to promote hate? That’s a nope. Ironically, while some of the defense of the “hate groups” inclusion seems to be “it’s only words,” librarians also believe words are powerful; you can’t have it both ways.

The [upshot](#) of this #NoHateALA controversy is that the ALA is standing by its principles, but says the statement can be revised if that’s what the membership wants.

So, what does this have to do with our larger information environment? The internet was heralded as a place where free speech would thrive, where everyone would have a voice, where all ideas could be debated. That hasn’t worked out, in part because people behave badly and moderation is hard. Also, the platforms that dominate the internet today commercialize speech. They use participants to generate content to gain attention so they can place ads, but without any responsibility for the content or any mechanism to stop vile, dangerous, or deceitful material from propagation. There is no fool-proof mechanical way to effectively moderate speech that is illegal (e.g. child pornography), offensive, or disinformation designed to mess with civil

society. Asking human participants to flag problems is inviting mischief and a lot more free labor. Facebook [won't ban](#) Alex Jones's Info Wars because it would violate free speech, but instead will try to hide it from view by downranking it. Meanwhile, news organizations find themselves made invisible unless they pay to promote an item – and then run the risk of [being labeled a political ad](#).

Libraries have had to thread this needle for quite some time, just as any online community has had to develop its own rules of engagement. (In only a few cases, the rules are there are no rules.) It takes both a feel for community (and actually being part of a community, not a globe-straddling one-size-fits-all platform to sell things and yell at each other) as well as a commitment to making space for a wide variety of ideas to cultivate intellectual freedom. That doesn't mean everyone has a right to say anything without consequences. It doesn't mean the loudest voices get to drown out the quieter ones. It doesn't mean those who aren't tough enough to stand up to mobbing, doxing, or swatting just don't get to participate. That's not intellectual freedom.

The fact that the American Library Association, which has had decades to work this out, is still wrestling over this issue means it's even more difficult to negotiate freedom of speech online. Google, Facebook, and all the other platforms we use are only beginning to recognize they have a problem. I'll give this more thought next week, after a brief interruption to enjoy the outdoors.

Academic Freedom and Librarians: A Natural Fit

September 17, 2018

It's an old problem. People don't know what librarians do for a living, but they *think* they know because libraries are a thing they grew up with. Librarians . . . do stuff in libraries, with library stuff. Like, they shelve books, right?

(This is hardly unique to librarians. I remember how frustrated my father, who taught at a public flagship university, was when his older brother casually asked “so what do you do all day? I mean, you only teach a few hours a week. How do you keep busy?” My uncle traded commodity futures. I had no idea what he did all day, though making a lot of money seemed to be part of it. Like my dad, he was offended when people didn't get his work. He had been a lifelong Republican until Richard Nixon, in a throwaway public comment about trade, mentioned “soybeans, whatever they are.” Insta-Democrat. He couldn't vote for a party that dissed soybeans.)

A lot of the work librarians do is invisible to people who use libraries, except perhaps interlibrary loan, which is totally run by magic. Librarians don't put books on the shelf, but they decided which ones should be on a shelf, figured out what shelf they should be on, and how to make it possible to find through a computer search, all while standing ready to defend the right of that book to be on a shelf in the library, among a millionty-one other things on their to-do list, most of them invisible if you're not thinking about it.

I think this may be partly why, when librarians assert [they should have academic freedom](#), people look puzzled. Why would you need that? Well, we have this thing we value called [intellectual freedom](#). It's a principle that applies beyond academia, and it's important. We have to work in conditions that allow us to support intellectual freedom for others. We also teach and do research, the stuff academic freedom is explicitly about, but supporting intellectual freedom is *literally our job* and we take it seriously, which sometimes means taking risks. It helps to know we won't be at risk ourselves if we do.

[UC librarians represented by UC-AFT](#) began to realize their assumption

that academic freedom applied to them was not spelled out explicitly, so they added the underlined language to a contract they are negotiating, expecting it to be non-controversial:

The University recognizes librarians as academic employees, and further recognizes that they possess specialized expertise and independent, professional judgment, and employ both in service to the mission of the University. The University recognizes that all librarians are entitled to academic freedom, as their primary responsibility to their institution and profession is to seek, state, and act according to the truth as they see it.

UC System's negotiators rejected it flatly, saying academic freedom was "not a good fit" for librarians.

Really?

It may be that UC's office of the president wants to rein in academic freedom in general, and saying in writing that librarians have it doesn't serve that cause. They might also have thought it would be easy. Or it could be they simply don't understand what librarians do.

Either way, I'm with the librarians on this. If you are, too, you might want to join the nearly 1,300 people who have signed [a petition of support](#). Don't take too long, though. Their next meeting is coming up next week, right in the middle of Banned Books Week. How fitting is that?

Are You Kidding Me?

November 1, 2018

One of the things we are working on during a general education revamp is tying the rhetorical strategies writers and speakers practice to the rhetorical strategies needed to decode texts, which includes understanding that there are different kinds of texts that do different kinds of work for different audiences.

Decoding texts (and even recognizing categories of texts) is a good deal more complicated than it was a few decades ago when we could hold up two publications and say “this is a popular source. That is a scholarly source. You can tell the difference by looking for these features.” That binary was always an oversimplification, but given the multiple kinds of information we see daily, a more firmly rhetorical approach to all kinds of texts seems necessary. Whether it’s a news story, a Tweet, or a political meme we need to be able to ask ourselves: who is speaking? Who are they speaking to? What is their purpose? Oh, and what are they actually saying? In a library context, that last question tends to take priority, perhaps because our search mechanisms assume that’s what you want to know. Type in what you’re looking for and you’ll get a bunch of publications about that thing, just like online shopping.

A lot of our online information shopping now happens through Google searches. We need to talk with students about how to distinguish news reporting from an opinion piece from a news analysis, and those distinctions can be tricky. Is the author of this piece a reporter or an op/ed contributor? What is the origin of this article I came across in my Apple News feed? How close to original reporting or research is this text, or is it a commentary on a recap of the original? A lot of distinguishing markers are lost as things get separated, repackaged, digested, and shared. Many students have never seen a journal in the wild and seldom read a magazine or a newspaper in print, and are not used to thinking “this journal represents an ongoing conversation among social psychologists” or “this news source is written for people living in a particular location, reporting local news with some news service material mixed in.” Each text retrieved in a search is part of a jumble of things, each needing to be decoded.

That decoding can be especially tricky as news and satire, opinions and jokes have blurred. One of the interesting findings of the latest [Project](#)

[Information Literacy](#) report on [how students engage with news](#) is that political memes figure significantly in their news consumption – something the original study design didn't even ask about, until subjects repeatedly brought it up. A previous generation of students may have watched The Daily Show more often than the evening news because they felt it did a better job of explaining what was really going on. That mix of news and satirical commentary added a layer of information that somehow was able to dig deeper into a news story's implications than the more deadpan delivery of a news anchor.

Something different goes on in internet channels that blend deeply-held opinions and theories with playful raunchiness. That misshapen frog Pepe, for instance, started as cartoon, was adopted as a [meme](#), and became a political symbol for the far right. Some of the tricksters on 4Chan [morphed](#) into Anonymous. They pulled pranks that were slapstick while also being serious. Later, a different group of 4Channers celebrated when Trump became president, saying they'd [elected a meme](#). There's a weird littoral zone where humor becomes serious, where political action is framed as pranks that others take seriously, where it's hard to nail down exactly what is intended, but the consequences can be significant.

This is where rhetorical analysis gets sticky. We may not know who's speaking because real names aren't used, and sometimes speakers are impersonating others; it's not always clear to whom they are speaking, but a dispute with an opponent can turn into a rallying cry online with consequences. We're not sure if the facts related are real or just a snare to humiliate the unwitting. Or if, in fact, it's part of an entire self-referential universe of alternative facts that has emerged out of the chaos.

Our students may know more than we realize about this, and perhaps less about how news is reported or what makes the peer review process a university press book goes through different from what trade publishers do. We have to think about how to give students rhetorical strategies and habits of curiosity for engaging with all kinds of texts – including ones in forms that don't yet exist. Otherwise, we're spending a lot of time learning to read scholarship and not enough on how to understand information that's out there in its myriad and morphing forms.

Information Literacy's Third Wave

February 14, 2019

We're developing a seven-week course that we proposed after a history professor urged the library to teach a course on fake news that everyone should have to take. We're not using the fraught phrase "fake news" and we have no plans to force it on anyone, but it's a great opportunity to think about what we mean when we say "information literacy." Students think librarians know stuff about libraries, which is where you go to find information for school. We actually know stuff about information systems that are not mediated by libraries and information literacy is more than finding sources for assignments. This course will focus on information that we encounter through various channels, how those channels work, how to quickly verify a doubtful claim and (to use Peter Elbow's phrase) how to play the believing game as well. As Mike Caulfield has [demonstrated](#), students don't need to learn skepticism as much as they need to learn when to trust. We'll see how it goes.

I'm beginning to think we're entering a Third Wave of information literacy. The first was empowering students to ask questions using information made available through libraries, and we called it bibliographic instruction. The second was rethinking what students needed to know because the internet happened and it was changing how we sought and shared information. Now it feels as if we're entering a different era. We're just beginning to respond to the commercialization and portability of networked information. Perhaps the negotiation among academic librarians to reformulate information literacy standards first adopted in 2000 marked the swelling of this new wave. It wasn't that we'd done it wrong before; the world of information was changing again, profoundly, and we needed new ways to talk about it.

What's new is not just that we are constantly connected to the internet, thanks to the computer-formerly-known-as-a-phone that we carry everywhere in our pockets, but our lives are in the pockets of a small number of very large companies that have colonized the internet and any number of industries. They have turned the internet and what we do on it into the

engine for a new form of capital (something Shoshona Zuboff explores in [her new book](#) that is currently near the top of Mount To Be Read). That new form of economic exchange influences our relationship to information institutions – book publishing, the news industry, entertainment, interpersonal communication, political communication, and more. That new form of capital is based on keeping us engaged (and sometimes enraged) to serve ads online while sweeping up immense volumes of granular information about nearly everything two billion human beings do as they both consume and generate information.

And we thought getting on the Information Superhighway was a big deal. This is way more complicated.

A friend pointed me to [a new report](#) from the Knight Commission on Trust, Media and Democracy. I haven't read its 150+ pages yet. All I've managed so far is the table of contents and the [Executive Summary](#), which is so short I wonder if executive time should be measured in nanoseconds. Anyway, the report raises big, gnarly questions about democracy, epistemology, media, technology, and citizenship. The trouble is each of these arenas is a big ball of complexity and all of them are interdependent. If we want to fix journalism, we also have to make changes to the technology that distributes it. We'll have to agree on what good reporting is, and that means dealing with disagreements about how we know what is true. We have to talk about governance if we want to mend our broken political relationships, but they're broken because people don't trust the government. We have to think about the economics underlying both the distrust of institutions and these new institutions of capital that depend on gathering and analyzing the minutia of our lives for predictive and persuasive purposes, and if we don't like what these companies are doing, we need regulation, which means we need trust in government and some agreement among ourselves about what is true. Round and round we go.

That's partly why I'm finding it hard to wrap my head around information literacy's Third Wave. If we think it matters, we have a lot to do, and it's all so entangled and complex that it's hard to know the best way to approach teaching students about how information works in the world we inhabit today. Students don't have time for the equivalent of a 200-page report analyzing the entanglements and complexities of the information they encounter daily when this third wave is breaking over us all. I don't blame them for wanting to cut to the chase if what they need to do right now is find

five peer-reviewed articles. Figuring out what's important for their survival this semester is where their focus is, and that's understandable.

But being educated is more than being able to pass courses and information isn't always in library databases. Librarians have for decades made the claim that information literacy matters. I hope we and our colleagues across the campus can find a way to rise to the challenge.

Meanwhile, I'm channeling some of my confusion into co-designing a course. There's some comfort in that.

Beyond the Battle for Open Access

March 3, 2019

A lot is going on in the world of scholarly and scientific publishing. So much that I have had trouble keeping up, especially since I'm also trying to keep up on what's happening in technology – big data, artificial intelligence, surveillance capitalism, things I wasn't taught in library school because they didn't exist yet. (We did, however, have an assignment involving punching cards to be fed into a PDP-11. Yes, I am that old.)

The [news from California](#) reminded me of the very first [essay](#) I wrote for *Inside Higher Ed*, back in 2008, before I became a regular here. Eleven years ago I saw a parallel between Facebook and scholarly publishing. We provide content for free, they provide the platform and somehow make loads of money in the process. In both cases, the value we gain is reputational. Facebook encourage us to display our identities, boost our brands, seek attention. Publishers remind us that we need them for tenure.

Both Big Deals and Big Tech benefit from network effects and the invisibility of their actual business model. We don't feel the pickpocket extracting personal information while we're online. Likewise, the cost of doing business with a multinational corporation with a profit margin that is much, much higher than that of the pharmaceutical industry seems minimal when all it involves is a checkmark on a submission form signing away copyright.

But times are changing and the imperative to reward shareholders drives these platforms to grow in new directions. As Shoshana Zuboff argues in *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, the old saw “if it's free, we're the product” is no longer true. Our lives and the data traces we leave behind are raw material for data-driven predictions about what we might do and how our behavior can be modified. Raw material for a predictive futures market.

Likewise, the Big Five publishers (Elsevier, Springer Nature, Taylor & Francis, Wiley, and Sage) who own the rights to a majority of published scientific and social science research are adjusting to a world in which open access has finally gained traction among the authors who provide their raw material. Ironically, it's not because librarians argued for years that the

profits were too high and too few people had access. It's because reputation metrics only work if publications can circulate as freely as possible through whatever channels enable that circulation and tally up the reputational score. The Big Five are happy to oblige. Open access has become a profitable new revenue stream for the same old companies, even as libraries still face pressure to subscribe to pricey journal packages.

Elsevier publishes a large number of journals and holds the worst reputation among the Big Five. It wants to keep revenue flowing at both ends, from subscriptions and author-side fees (payments to make works open access). Since UC couldn't get a deal they considered fair, they took the ten million they spend annually on Elsevier journal subscriptions and walked away. As Walt Crawford [noted](#) on Twitter,

So UC won't pay Elsevier's price. Not that one institution that accounts for, what, 10% of American scientific research articles, matters, of course, but...10% here, 10% there, it starts to add up. (Proud of my alma mater.)

This is a courageous and necessary act of resistance. More institutions should use their leverage and press harder to avoid paying for both author fees and subscriptions to the same outfits. (Note: it's really only in fields where there is funding for research that an open access model that relies on author-side fees makes any sense; there are lots of [other models](#) for fields where there isn't grant money floating around.) Universities will have to muster up the courage that UC faculty are showing to avoid creating a new normal that sustains obscene profits at public expense.

But . . . open access isn't the only place where new profits can be made. Elsevier and its parent RELX have been [scooping up companies](#) that provide services to researchers. They bought Mendeley. They bought bepress and SSRN. They bought Aries. They bought Hivebench and Plum Analytics and Sci Val. They've partnered with University College London to found a Big Data Institute to further refine their grasp of analytics and the lives of research communities. They want the work of researchers to be the raw material for a new kind of profitable business, one that's woven into everything researchers do. They want to be like Google, a company that inserts itself into every aspect of the lives of its raw material subjects, and just as indispensable.

When we think of Google as a search company, we forget they are also

mapping the world, collecting data through our phones and emails, recognizing our faces, partnering with intelligence and military agencies, even building smart neighborhoods full of sensors to render the public sphere a private data hoard, useful for the roll-out of their autonomous vehicle fleets. In comparison, Elsevier is small potatoes. But while it clings to pricey subscriptions so long as it can, it has big plans for new revenue streams in the form of your research workflow. Keep your eyes open and a hand on your data-wallet.

No Big Deal

March 28, 2019

Perhaps [the era of the Big Deal is ending](#). It hasn't been sustainable for years, and now research libraries around the country are following the lead of the University of California and several European library consortia, walking away from deals that extract money from subscriptions and authors at an extortionate price. (Publishers argue they provide good value, but 35 percent profit margins are not normal.) Is the tide turning? Have we woken up at last?

Or have we failed to learn our lesson? A colleague told me the other day that a library like ours, but with more money and staff, is no longer buying books in print. They're putting virtually all of their book budget into licensing ebook packages from publishers and vendors. They're investing in Big Deals, in other words.

This seems odd to me. Ebooks may be great for commuter campuses and online programs. At residential undergraduate colleges with a liberal arts curriculum, it's not a hardship for students to go to the library, and they seem to feel reading long-form arguments is easier in print than from a PDF or ePub document, especially if digital rights management is involved. (From my limited experience, none of the academic book platforms use Amazon Kindle's proprietary format, though it dominates the trade ebook market.)

For undergraduates, there's also value having a curated library collection that is tailored to the curriculum and the kinds of reading experiences that enrich a liberal arts education. Paying for access to everything a publisher has to offer may make sense at an R1, but providing such abundance simply outsources curation to students, who probably find browsing six shelves of hand-picked books easier than six thousand books written for all kinds of audiences. And what about the smaller and alternative presses that aren't represented in these Big Deals? Here, help yourself to every book Oxford and Springer Nature publishes, but don't ask for anything from Coffee House, Milkweed, or Haymarket books. They're not part of the deal.

That library is not a total outlier. Earlier this week, I had some upper-division classes in the library doing research on topics where it made sense to click a handy button in our catalog to search "libraries worldwide" – but several times students were lost, looking for the "request" button. For

mysterious reasons, Worldcat seems to push ebooks above print books in results lists. I had to point out the small “print books” limiter and explain you can’t request ebooks – they’re only licensed for a single campus, or at least are so often limited there is no process in place for requesting a digital book. If lots of libraries go with Big Deals for books, interlibrary sharing, one of the great inventions of the 20th century, will wither.

While our system is dandy for finding things we’re not allowed to share, it’s not always great at discovering open access materials. Quite often, an open access publication listed in a database or a book in the catalog will fail to link to the item, and that confuses students. The behind-the-scenes work that has to go into making things connect from one database to another or from a catalog to an electronic source is complex, and it may seem silly to worry about cataloging something that can be found with a Google search – but if our shared catalogs lead to things we can’t borrow but fail to find open access books, we’re really dropping the ball.

Shortly after that conversation about buying nothing but ebooks, a colleague noticed we can access lots of books through Project MUSE, which I had thought of as a collection of journals because apparently I haven’t been paying attention. We haven’t licensed ebooks through MUSE, but a lot of high-quality open access books now turn up in a search thanks to [a Mellon-funded project](#) to make them more discoverable. These are well-organized and do appear in our catalog. That’s the way to do it.

I doubt I’ll ever be convinced that ebooks alone are the way to go for libraries. Our students seem to still prefer print and the rights we surrender when licensing ebooks are precious. I’m grateful that more and more academic books are available as open access ebooks – there is a wide readership without affiliation with a university library that stands to benefit. But I hope libraries think twice before signing up for another kind of Big Deal. We’ve been there before, and it doesn’t end well.

Dona Nobis Pacem

October 28, 2019

If you want to get my goat, or, I daresay, the goat of any librarian, make a gratuitous reference to shushing. The finger held to the lips, the aggressive whisper, the frown at a pin's drop. We don't do these things, but it's a stereotype that is endlessly used in article titles and commercials, and it's annoying.

Still, something struck me as I was recently mulling over what it is that libraries offer in our frazzled, commercialized, surveillant society. I've [made the claim before](#) that [library values](#), if not actual library practices, could be beneficially applied to the digital platforms we use every day. Caring about privacy, intellectual freedom, the public good and free access to information for all would go a long way toward making our tech corporations more just and socially responsible. We may be making a little progress on that front. There seems to be a growing desire among tech workers to take their role in society seriously – see [a letter](#) recently endorsed by hundreds of Facebook employees protesting the company's decision to allow political campaigns to skirt the rules that govern other advertisers, allowing politicians to spread targeted misinformation. But there's a long way to go.

There's one thing not on the ALA's list of values that may well be something people value about libraries: quiet. We don't have many quiet places in our lives anymore. Our technology hums incessantly, our keyboards click and our phones nudge us with alerts. It takes a toll: noise is harmful to [humans](#) and [animals](#). Even when out in nature, you're likely to hear the whoosh of distant traffic or hear a plane passing overhead. There's something about human-made noise that makes us feel a bit anxious, pressed for time, wondering what we're missing while we try to focus.

Libraries don't bill themselves as quiet places these days. We like to think they are social, active, buzzing with energy, because that makes us seem vital and necessary. Besides, they often *are* noisy – noisy enough that students ask for areas to be set aside for quiet study. We set one of our three floors aside as a quiet floor years ago at the request of students. Some find it intimidatingly “serious,” but others gravitate to it at least for some of their study time. For students who don't have a lot of quiet places in their lives, [those spaces are particularly valuable](#).

In March 1997 Sally Tisdale railed against the “library as entertainment center” in *Harper’s Magazine* ([paywalled](#)); more recently Laura Miller plaintively asked that we “[bring back shushing librarians](#),” noting that [a Pew study](#) found over three-quarters of a representative sample of Americans valued quiet places in libraries, just one percentage point behind internet access – but that was not a finding the report highlighted, nor is it something librarians tend to brag about. Come on in, enjoy the silence. That seems unbearably retro – and yet ...

I’ve often reflected on how pleasant it is to be at work in the stacks. I usually attributed it to the presence of books, to their representation of the patient and enduring majesty of knowledge, but it’s not just that – it’s also the contemplative quiet that settles even if my laptop and phone are with me, bringing all the emails and tweets and calendar notifications with them. It feels as if time slows down, my heart rate calms and all the frantic busyness of life falls away for just a while. There’s contemplation in the quiet. We could all use some of that.

Yes, Books Are Banned

September 23, 2019

Every year since 1982, the American Library Association, publishers, booksellers, and allied organizations like PEN America have dedicated a week in September to highlight the importance of the freedom to read. This is [Banned Books Week](#). Admittedly, it might be tempting back off on the rhetoric and call it “books people take steps to try to remove from schools and libraries and often succeed week” because we don’t generally see books being censored by the government, but that wouldn’t as effectively communicate the fact that a lot of people have their reading choices constrained or threatened because somebody thinks certain books are satanic or might convert youth into gays or should be deep-sixed because they have bad words in them. The attempts at suppression we hear about most often have to do with [sexuality and kids](#), but [Harry Potter has been a hot item](#) on the list, too. (Sometimes it does seem as if demons have been summoned, but I don’t think reading that series aloud is responsible.)

Ironically, Edward Snowden and the publisher of his memoir have just been [sued](#) by two intelligence agencies because the former government contractor-turned-whistleblower-turned-permanent-exile [didn’t comply with a nondisclosure agreement](#) and didn’t let the agencies he worked for edit things out of the book. (There are no government secrets revealed in the book – just information that previously appeared in news stories and his personal story.) To be sure, they aren’t preventing the books from being available, they just want to seize any proceeds that would go to Snowden and have sued the publisher to make them hand over that portion of the proceeds. Still, it might make publishers reluctant to take on books by less famous authors that are either held up by [a lengthy and questionable redaction process](#) or might cost them legal fees.

But our government doesn’t actually *ban* books, does it? [Sure it does!](#) The federal government, and state and local governments, [do it](#) all the time. [The New Jim Crow](#). [The Color Purple](#). [Excel for Dummies](#). In the incarceration capital of the world, books are often withheld from prisons because of their content, though sometimes for capricious and inexplicable reasons. When this kind of censorship [becomes public](#) prison officials often back down because it’s embarrassing. But still it happens. Access to books can be

suppressed in other ways. You can't just send a book you've read and want to share to a prisoner. Many if not most prisons require people to buy new books only from authorized vendors. Some are moving to arrangements with a [vendor that supplies "free" tablets](#) that offer a limited range of books for a high price – and in some cases are the only books incarcerated people are allowed to read. Mind you, families of incarcerated people already have to [pay exorbitant rates to communicate with their loved ones](#), increasingly through corporate systems that charge a lot, and [incarcerated people earn peanuts](#) if they have jobs inside, in some states, their labor pays them nothing at all.

You know what book is among the most often requested? A dictionary. For some reason, that breaks my heart a little.

Books and education help people survive, not just when they're locked up. We [know it can help](#) formerly incarcerated people get on with their lives. It may not be possible to dispose of the excess books in your personal library by donating them to prisons, but the [Prison Book Program](#) has useful [list of books to prison programs](#) if you'd like to help.

Meanwhile, let's pay attention to these places in America where censorship and book banning happen to people every day.

Retrenched

September 18, 2019

I've been hearing for years that we should expect increasing competition for students in the upper Midwest and New England because the [population of traditionally college-age students has been declining](#). That decline is predicted to become [precipitous in a few years](#), since after the 2008 crash the birth rate dropped and hasn't rebounded. For institutions that aren't bribe-worthy and elite enough to have both big endowments and heavy competition for admission, the belt-tightening that has been going on for a long time will get worse.

So I'm not entirely surprised that a public university in my neighborhood is making cuts after years of declining enrollments. St. Cloud State has sent letters to eight tenured faculty announcing they will be let go at the end of the academic year. Their union [disputes](#) the decision-making process and challenges the administration's legal right to move forward with this retrenchment.

One of the layoffs is in the Theater department, which is also losing a position to retirement – and its major will be discontinued. Three of the layoffs are in philosophy. [That's about half the department](#). Replacements have not been approved in recent years, and four retirements are pending, so that department is also on the near-extinction list.

Four of the layoffs – half of the total – are in the library. (For non-librarian readers, it's not uncommon for librarians to hold faculty status, including meeting requirements for tenure.) There will be eight remaining librarians to serve over 14,000 students, 200 majors, 60 graduate programs, and two doctoral programs.

Libraries are easy pickings because librarians' labor is almost by design fairly invisible. When you click on a database link and download an article, it may take only a second, but people did a lot of work to make that happen: they selected and negotiated a license annually for that database, put links to it in all the right places on the library website, changed them when the vendor [randomly decided to rebrand](#) (please don't), and did a ton of fiddly work to make sure the links to hundreds of thousands of individual articles actually work. When all goes well, it appears seamless. In the [classic words](#)

[of S. R. Ranganathan](#), we want to save the time of the reader. But it's a ton of labor that nobody sees.

Then there's the considerable work of helping students one-on-one and in courses figure out not just where to click but why scholarship matters and how to think through questions with the help of good sources. We also work with other libraries so we can share what resources are sharable. If you got an article or book by interlibrary loan, a lot of people had to do a lot of work to make that happen. You're welcome.

There's no question universities will have to adapt to changing enrollment patterns. The best way to do that is openly and with shared information and with a process that allows data to be examined and challenged if necessary. The [philosophy department argues](#) the administration's decisions didn't take into account recent changes in enrollments and offerings, including gen ed courses. In the case of the library, the reasoning behind the cuts is that fewer reference questions are being asked (something that's true in nearly all academic libraries) and far fewer books were checked out last year than in 1993.

You know what happened since 1993? Journals went online and became easier to find than books. No mention in the analysis of how much use digital resources have received at the library. No mention of the fact that there [has been no budget to buy new books for the past three years](#), which can discourage checking them out. So the administration argues with fewer students and faculty on campus and less (selectively-measured) library use, they now have to cut people. People who teach credit-bearing courses, but mostly help other faculty teach. People who work with students every day. Half of the faculty being cut in the library are the only faculty of color in the department. I'm well aware that falling enrollments have to be addressed, but as these positions are eliminated another 30 are reportedly being hired in selected departments that have "stable or rising enrollments."

The St. Cloud State University library has already lost positions in recent years, both faculty and staff, through attrition, and its non-salary budget has been nearly cut in half since 2014. I'm not going to claim libraries are more deserving than other departments, but I am offended by the way library labor is so often discounted because we work hard to make using library resources seem as effortless as possible. If you think your library doesn't matter, why not avoid the thousand-cuts approach and shut it down altogether? Without people, the library perishes. It can't run itself.

But hey, the university has high hopes it will get another \$700,000

appropriated by the state to update the hockey arena that had an \$18 million renovation a few years ago. I guess that shows what really matters.

Learning Why, Not How

August 8, 2019

I agree [with Jenny Young](#) that emphasizing correct citation in composition courses is not helping students learn why and how to use other people's ideas effectively in writing. In fact, I agreed with her [as far back as 2009](#) and probably earlier. My primary beef with making formal citation practices a significant part of introducing new college students to academic argument is that it puts too much emphasis on covering your butt and being able to follow complex rules and too little on engaging with ideas, or engaging with the humans who share ideas as part of a collective effort to understand the world. The activity of constructing citations is used as a stand-in for what academics actually value about ethical and well-sourced argument, but it's a stand-in that conceals rather than illuminates.

Some argue learning how to cite sources is essential for learning to use good sources or respect intellectual property or avoid plagiarism or make responsible arguments. Learning how to compose citations has little to do with any of that.

Good journalists cite their sources, but without footnotes. Good public speakers are careful to attribute ideas not just to avoid being humiliated by charges of plagiarism but because it helps them develop their own authority and strengthens their argument. Supreme court justices cite sources in decisions but in oral argument, they have to make clear what authorities they are drawing on as they debate the issues with petitioners. Sources matter. Citations are just one way to describe them.

As a librarian (who mostly worked with students in the library but has also taught the occasional first semester seminar), here's what I see are the problems new students have with the way we teach citations as part of academic argument:

- Too much headspace is taken up with trivia (not actually reading and referring to texts but extracting quotes and constructing hand-coded references to sources). It takes hours away from actually working on their writing.
- They are misled about plagiarism because they associate it with correct citations, not with how to handle the ideas being cited.

- They don't learn why citations are useful because they associate them almost exclusively with the possibility of making mistakes and the threat of punishment.
- They don't connect composing citations with academic values: having an open mind, respecting evidence even if it doesn't support your hypothesis, making sure readers know how you arrive at your conclusion, and honoring expertise. None of that is made obvious from the act of citing sources.
- They are likely to think academic argument is weird and not something that matters beyond school because nobody else argues that way. Actually, they do but if you're focused on proper citations, you won't see the similarities.

Yesterday I was having one of those good mornings when ideas were coming fast from different sources I'd encountered, snapping together like cognitive tinker toys and, as I paused to jot some notes, it occurred to me that we typically asked to come up with a topic or question for research and then search for sources, which is exactly the opposite of the experience I was having. And I began to brainstorm a sequence of possible activities to rethink how we introduce first year students to the value of using sources (though this is hardly new; [John Warner's book](#) is full of great teaching ideas).

- Toss an idea out to students and ask them what they think. Make it something that's in their wheelhouse – an issue to do with the campus itself, or something that group of first year students have in common. (It might be something they're already talking about as they settle into their seats.) Ask them to reflect on how they learned about it or who told them and why they trust that person. Nudge them to think about why some information is trustworthy and why some is less so. See if you can collectively sum up what the class agrees on and what points are still unresolved. Ask how they would address those points. What more would they need to find out? Show how moments of curiosity turn into questions and how research is not about finding sources, it's about *finding out*.
- Show how academics do the same thing by modeling one of your ideas. It could be the starting point of a formal research project, but it could just be a moment when your curiosity was piqued and you found stuff out to satisfy it. Draw a messy map on the board. I read this, I

remembered that, somebody mentioned, I wondered about, so I needed to know ...

- Invite students to share similar experiences with each other. What have you wondered about? What's an argument you have tried to make, and what did you have to find out to explain it to someone who didn't know much about the topic?
- Reflect on their process of finding out and how they decided who or what to trust. Look at some of their sources using the same concepts you've already used to help them as writers – who's speaking? Who's the audience? What's the purpose? Give them [some habits](#) for evaluating what they found. What's the source? If someone referred to a news story, what does the actual news story say? What's the nature of that news organization (something Wikipedia can answer surprisingly often.) What do other sources say? Use those explorations to emphasize that credibility matters, that people use sources so you can track them down and learn more, that this kind of research matters in everyday life. That making good, ethical arguments using credible sources that you name isn't just for school.
- If you really want to get ambitious, give students experience reading citations to see how they work. But writing them – that can wait until there's an actual need, maybe after they've chosen a major.

On the few occasions I taught a course that emphasized writing for first year students, I did what a lot of instructors do: I had an assignment that required constructing citations because I knew students would be told in other courses they should already have been taught how in my course. It never really worked, and I knew the students would have to learn all over again using different manuals because disciplines want to know different things quickly when they read citations. Now I wish the “service” I provided had been giving students a better grasp of *why* we cite, not how to do it, because no matter what I said about “why,” it still converted itself in the minds of my students into following rules and avoiding punishment.

What's the Big Idea?

July 11, 2019

“We can’t be all things to all people.” – *higher ed prognosticators*

Ever since reading [John Warner's piece](#) asking what the university is, then, when we remove some of the things and people, I've been mulling at the back of my mind about the idea of libraries as a public good. The [Library Bill of Rights](#) pretty much outlines the library as all things. “Libraries should provide materials and information presenting all points of view on current and historical issues.” And they are meant to serve all people. “Books and other library resources should be provided for the interest, information, and enlightenment of all people of the community.”

Of course, there aren't enough shelves to hold All the Things, let alone the money to buy them. And while public libraries are for all the people, the definition of “all” is closely tied to the boundaries and the funding of a specific community. The community in the case of a public library is determined by the boundaries of whatever governmental entity funds the library. For academic libraries, it's the students currently enrolled at the institution and the faculty and staff who work there. Walk-in use and interlibrary loan can make those boundaries more porous, but essentially libraries are local, and respond to local needs and interests.

That local tie leads to inequity. Wealthy communities are able to afford better library services than poor ones. But I suspect one of the reasons libraries are generally popular or at worst benignly neglected is that people feel as if the library is *theirs*. Nobody at a head office far away calls the shots; nobody is told they aren't good enough to be allowed through the door. Nobody is told if they don't use the library, they won't have a future or that the ideas they are interested in and want to pursue aren't worthy of study.

The law that established land grant universities was passed 157 years ago. The anniversary fell during the same week we learned the governor of Alaska was drastically cutting its public university budgets, along with other programs. It's a big state with a relatively small population. Its universities have never been able to offer all things. But there was something inspiring about the idea of establishing universities in every state and, in turn, giving every state the benefits of research and education. Will we ever be able to have such big idea again? I hope so. Meanwhile, we still have a remnant

of those big ideas in our local libraries, where everyone is welcome and educating yourself won't put you in debt.

Sharing and Attention in the Academic Gig Economy

June 17, 2019

It struck me today that there is a parallel between the way Big Entertainment appears to have [abandoned its attempt to extend copyright terms yet again](#) and the way Big Academic Publishing is beginning to learn how to [stop worrying](#) and [love open access](#).

As you may recall, in 1998, Congress rolled the public domain back with the [Sonny Bono Copyright Term Extension Act](#), often called the Mickey Mouse Protection Act because Disney was particularly worried about its signature rodent graduating from their limited copyright mouse monopoly. Instead of the 14-year, once renewable, monopoly granted creators specified in the Constitution, it had been extended multiple times to finally reach 70 years after the death of the author (or 95 years for works owned by a corporation). The mouse is approaching liberation again, but Disney [isn't likely](#) to reboot its lobbying efforts for at least two reasons: it would be massively unpopular with a much more organized public and it turns out [letting people remix culture is good for business](#). Free marketing! Besides, it's hard to go after everyone who takes inspiration from pop culture in a world of ambient social media.

Today, Big Academic Publishing seems to have grudgingly accepted the inevitability of open access and has been developing new business models to preserve their profits, by publishing large volumes of open access articles and launching new OA journals funded by author-side fees and by creating workflow infrastructures that will provide publishers with fees and data. Defending toll-access publishing has proven increasingly unpopular with the authors they depend on, funders are increasingly insisting on public access to research results, and it turns out making research sharable is good for business – not just for publishers, who want content they can publish for a fee and plenty of marketing, but for authors living in a world where sharing is the natural state of things. Everyone wants to be an influencer these days.

I am an open access advocate, and have been for years, but I'm worried about the idea of sharing knowledge being reframed around the assumptions of that problematic euphemism, the "sharing economy." Isn't it great to share

your guest bedroom with strangers or pick up people who need a ride in your own car? Yeah, but it turns out that kind of sharing, at vast scale and without regulation, worker protections, or any kind of public planning input causes a lot of problems.

Of course publishing has never been a purely altruistic practice of making research public. Authors who signed away their copyright depended on getting prestige and CV lines in exchange. Now with sharing there are even more rewards in the form of influence metrics – not just times cited but downloads, retweets, and other measurable forms of attention.

Making research findings available to anyone with an internet connection is certainly an improvement over limited access. But if we embrace a vision of open access based on more and more production from an increasingly precarious academic labor force, still vastly controlled by the same five mega-corporations as before, I'm not sure we are advancing knowledge so much as we're advancing a weird combination of the "sharing economy" and the "attention economy" – leaving little time to actually keep up or slow down and think. The academic attention-sharing economy has something in common with driving for Uber, which quite possibly is something some precarious academics do to make ends meet as productivity quotas go up and steady jobs give way to the gig economy.

Bloopers and Expertise

June 13, 2019

We hold a meeting at the end of the academic year where there's only one thing on the agenda: what's going on with our students as they try to make sense of information? We always have some assessment data to go over, but we also talk about how classes went and what we've seen at the reference desk. We talk about what we could do better next year, but some problems are perennial. How can we work with faculty across the curriculum more effectively? How can we help students find something meaningful in the work they're doing when they seem so anxious, focused on deadlines and grades? How can they see themselves as participants in a fascinating conversation?

Part of the challenge of that last question is that it's not easy to enter scholarly conversations when the others doing the talking have PhDs and do a lot of name-dropping. That's hard, but being able to find scholarly papers is not as important as learning why research matters. You don't have to be thoroughly trained in laboratory or fieldwork procedures to get a sense of the scientific method. You don't have to become a whiz at statistical analysis to understand that data can be valuable if you interrogate it the right way. You can get a sense of how to think historically without going to graduate school. That's sort of the whole idea of a liberal arts education.

We'll probably never find the perfect recipe for our instruction. But if nothing else, I hope students learn that there are time-tested ways to seek the truth, that some ways are going to get you further than others, and that we don't have to do it all ourselves, that people have spent entire careers digging deeply into hard questions.

This week I noticed some cases where it would have saved a lot of grief if people asked the experts. Veteran political journalist Cokie Roberts got a shellacking on Twitter for doing a Q&A about the history of abortion law, saying she didn't believe abortion services had been advertised in the 19th century because she couldn't find any ads, saying the history of abortion is as fraught as its politics. (I'm not exactly sure what she said because [the transcript](#) has been corrected.) This is a perfect example of a common rookie search mistake. Language changes, and there were reasons to use

coded phrases when referring to things like women's bodies in a 19th century context. If you're searching the past, even if its digitized, you need to do a bit of linguistic time travel. (Oops.)

Then there was the [Tweet](#) in which a tech entrepreneur who's having second thoughts suggested we should start a new field so people can study how society and technology intersect. Maybe there should be courses or something. And, as has happened any number of times before, scholars who have been studying this very thing and teaching courses about it for years wearily raised their hands. Um, hello? We've been here all along. Maybe you should read some of the books we've been publishing? (The entrepreneur clarified all that scholarship was valuable but he's envisioning a field for *real engineers*. Halp.)

And there was the [nightmarish moment](#) when, on live radio, an interviewer pointed out Naomi Wolf had misunderstood a legal term that she relied on in a new book. The book is based on work she did for a degree in English, not history or law, and she assumed "death recorded" in court records meant . . . a death was recorded. Common sense, perhaps, but it would have been wise to run her ideas past a historian familiar with Victorian-era British law before going to press, let alone on air. (Oh my gawd.)

Scholars bristle when their work is overlooked, not surprisingly. Sociologist Philip Cohen does a good job [unpacking this impulse at The New Republic](#) in view of the Wolf radio interview. He thinks we all need to get better at "lane-hopping" – being able to work across disciplines by making connections with experts in other fields and sharing that expertise. Better to stick together, he argues, than to insist people should stick to their own lane (or assume someone else's lane is a dead end because someone in it had a very public crash). Again, this is sort of the idea of a liberal arts education – expertise matters, but it's a collective enterprise and (Cohen points to Kathleen Fitzpatrick's [Generous Thinking](#)) we will do better if we are open about our own ignorance while being willing to share what we know.

I guess that's what I hope for our graduates – that when they run into a question that matters to them, they don't just Google it, they think "I wonder who's spent some serious time studying this?" and that, once they've found out who those people are – they're on Google too, after all – they value what scholars do enough to put some trust in what they have learned.

Not So Fast!

June 5, 2019

My friend and former colleague Amy Fry wrote [a smart response](#) (not paywalled) to an essay by Timothy Messer-Kruse in the *Chronicle Review*, “[How Google Scrambled the Academic Mind](#)” (paywalled). Messer-Kruse argues that digitization has “vaporized” the structured knowledge represented in the card catalog and other forms of pre-digital organization that relied on human curation, abandoning order to the anarchy of keywords and word frequencies used by Google. (In fact, Google’s algorithm is [a good bit more complicated than that](#), but it isn’t hand-crafted.)

He notes that catalog records still exist in library discovery systems, but are less useful than they could be. He laments that you can’t “descend through layers of specificity to discretely arranged topics” – though, if I recall my old-school cataloging rules, that never was the case with subject headings. You were supposed to describe the book in specific terms, though subheadings could further refine that specificity. If the book was about parrots, you didn’t put vertebrates – birds – parrots in a subject heading. You put parrots, with maybe a geographic subdivision. The arrangement of topics from broad to specific is found in classification, the rules that determine which shelf the book will be on – something that doesn’t generally pertain with ebooks. There are a other errors that Messer-Kruse would have been spared had he talked to a librarian. (No, publishers didn’t give books subject headings, the Library of Congress started doing that in 1971 with the Cataloging in Publication project.) But I am somewhat sympathetic to his main point: we have grown accustomed to the idea that if we use the right keywords, we should be able to find answers quickly and easily.

Amy Fry doesn’t fault him on the facts, she points to the reality that organization doesn’t matter if the stuff isn’t there in the first place. She writes

Few academics may realize that we are in the midst of a vast dismantling of academic library infrastructure . . . no matter how carefully libraries catalog, if we are not adding the content to our collections that the majority of our students and researchers need to use, there will be nothing there for them to find.

Those who know me will predict that I agree. Libraries don't buy books like they once did, even ones well-suited for a particular academic community. For undergraduates, in particular, books are often more useful than the more specialized treatment of topics found in the scholarly journals articles that are devouring our shrinking budgets. Bundles of ebooks are not the solution when we know [students prefer print](#) (though ebooks make win out for students in distance programs or where commuting time and limited parking make library visits difficult). And unlike print books, most ebooks can't be shared through interlibrary loan, which is a huge step backward.

Both Amy Fry and Timothy Messer-Kruse wonder what this means for student learning. Amy points out that students won't have much alternative to Google if the library doesn't have anything to offer. Messer-Kruse worries that students seem incapable of asking questions, only of searching for topics, stymied by the anarchy of unorganized search.

I'm not so sure. I was hired the year my library switched from a card catalog to a computerized version in the late 1980s. It took several years before indexes and abstracts went online, first to CD-ROMs and then to databases. Only recently did we acquire the now-ubiquitous "discovery" system that mixes the catalog with databases unless you know how to ask it not to. In over thirty years, I don't recall a time when students didn't struggle with the idea that they should ask questions, not simply seek answers, that they should make arguments, not write reports. That's always been a challenge.

The Googlization of the catalog has certainly had downsides. When students are looking for a book we don't have but find a review of it, they are naturally confused. When we locate the book in another library, but they can't borrow it because it's an ebook, they're understandably disgruntled. They have to be shown the filters on the side of their results that let them narrow to books or by broad subject headings, which just seems like extra work. When libraries got jealous of Google's popularity, we thought we could reconstruct its simplicity, but we don't have Google's engineers and the kinds of information we offer is not easily put on a Google Knowledge Graph Card, those little boxed answers that appear next to your results, usually swiped from the first paragraph of a Wikipedia article.

But to be honest, library systems of cataloging and classification have never been great when it comes to seeing connections and building knowledge through understanding context. Maybe Google has created the false impression that finding answers is easy, because they've made easy to

answer simple questions. But students need both the time to explore and the motivation to ask questions that matter – and that has never been simple or easy.

Papers, Please

May 23, 2019

The semester is coming to a close and the reference desk is eerily quiet. I know students still are working on projects – I hear them complaining about it – but I guess the strategy at this late date is to alternate venting with hunkering down to generate pages.

The angst I overhear is about pages. “I need ten and I only have three. How am I supposed to fill ten?” Or “it’s twenty pages. *Twenty pages!*” It’s not what the pages are about: “I need to write about Heidegger and I don’t have a clue what he’s saying.” Or “I need to include a literature review in my ethnography, but I’ve looked and looked and nobody has written articles that posed exactly the same research question as I did, so what am I supposed to do?” No, it’s not the ideas they’re trying to write about. It’s almost always about the pages.

A parallel concern is about the number of sources. This spring I worked with a student at the reference desk as she sought information for an assignment. We discussed the ideas in the articles and books we were turning up as we sorted through the possibilities, and she was obviously excited about the topic, but the conversation came to an abrupt halt. “I have five now. That’s all I need.” Done. Bye.

If you try to frame a task as something other than finding a specific number of sources to cite or pages to fill, students will ask for those numbers, and I can’t blame them. They don’t want to be tripped up by some unstated expectation that may seem obvious but isn’t when they’re still learning the ropes. But the reality is that very little of the writing students do, no matter how carefully revision activities are built into the course, is ever finished, as polished as it possibly could be. Semester are too short, the learning curve too steep, the number of papers due in various courses too many.

As much as I am [a skeptic of the “research paper”](#) as a genre, I admit it can be a valuable experience for many students, and even when they aren’t really finished – the topic proved too sprawling to be contained effectively in a single paper, the argument is beginning to show its shape but has yet to be carved out of the block of exploratory text – they can give students a sense of their own voice, their own capacity for making meaning. They may gain a sense of agency when it works. But too often, it’s just an endurance test.

In any case, I expect to keep hearing complaints – but they will be from instructors as the papers students are grouching about today come in for a landing.

Change and Agency

December 5, 2019

I've always had a prickly relationship with the word "change" when it comes to libraries. It has been invoked as both an existential threat – we had better change, and fast, or we'll be irrelevant – and as an imperative – you must change, or you're one of those stodgy people who stands in the way of progress. There have been entire consultancies devoted to explaining how library organizations should change. And it's all over our literature. There are over 9,000 articles with that word in the title published since 1990 in the LISTA database. It ramped up especially during the first decade of the current century. The rate of increase has slowed down – just a little over a thousand new titles in the decade just coming to a close – though "innovation" is nudging ahead, used in very similar ways.

That institutionalization of change as a top-down demand responding to external threats and fear of obsolescence is both irritating and exhausting. Nobody likes to be heckled about how behind they are and how the things they've been doing (and which still have to be done) don't count for much. Admittedly, there is a conservative tendency in libraries – not politically; we tend to be pretty lefty – but in terms of organizational culture. Unlike most academics, we often have to ask permission for even small things, we tend to make decisions by committee, and it's not in our nature to claim credit. The library launches new programs. The library announces a change. The building has amazing powers. Some of us can be suspicious of new things and want to know if they will be sustainable, even if it's a response to something we're doing now that is clearly not sustainable. People who find this cautious pocket-veto culture frustrating tend to leave, or be driven out, depending on your point of view. Yet most librarians I know are not reluctant to think creatively and indulge in curiosity (why do we do this thing, exactly? Could we try? I wonder what would happen if?) without being ordered to "embrace change or else" by their boss.

I'm thinking about this after reading Audrey Watters' feisty provocation, [Ed-Tech Agitprop](#) (I can't wait for her book, *Teaching Machines*,* to come out) followed by the text of Donna Lanclos' recent talk, [The Anthropologist in the Machine](#). The notion of "change" or "innovation" is really only fraught when it's institutionalized – either as an imperative driven by threat or as

an irresistible force of forward momentum. Both approaches miss something really important.

We have always changed. We manage the unending parade of technical upgrades and migration, we switch up the syllabus, we try new things in the classroom. We notice something isn't working or someone is left out, and we put our heads together to come up with a fix. We build alliances, and we quietly retire ones that aren't working. We bring new people aboard and we greet new students every semester, a fresh chance to do things differently. A lot of these changes are invisible, either because they are new things we do continually in our teaching and reference work and as we address the budget cuts that keep coming or because we want to roll out things that have changed in a way that is as painless for our users as possible. A lot of our work is continually tinkering to make things better and try stuff out. A lot of it is maintenance, a lot of it is repair, some of it is reflection (though there's precious little time for that) and some of it is considered resistance to things like the inaccessibility of research to the public, the price of textbooks that leaves too many students out, and invasions of privacy.

But when we're ordered to change so we operate more like a start-up or be more like Google, we should recognize the library is already a "[growing organism](#)." Change can be resistance to market assumptions, walls, and student surveillance framed as "success." It's innovation when we align the changes we make day-to-day with values that matter. Standing up for what libraries are and should be is revolutionary enough these days.

Evidence and Authority in the Age of Algorithms

(Presented at “Teaching Writing in a Post-Truth Era,” University of Notre Dame, August 20, 2019)

I come to the issue of teaching writing in the post-truth era from a somewhat different perspective than our previous speakers. I’m a librarian who has long been interested in the ways students get ideas, interact with other’s ideas, and how their experiences as writers in college shape their identity as people with agency and a grasp of how knowledge is made and negotiated by people – people like them. I’m taken with the parallels between writing instruction and what librarians do. Your writing program has as a goal ethical and moral use of words and evidence.

Making an argument is an ethical activity, one that helps students develop intellectual and moral virtues.

It’s about learning how words work and how to use those words ethically. This is also what information literacy is about. Learning is the primary purpose for librarians’ work with undergraduates. My library’s definition of information literacy is similarly ambitious – not just how to find and use information in the library and online, but more deeply to understand where information comes from, how it’s connected to social processes, and how they can participate in those processes with a clear sense of right and wrong.

We sometimes get distracted from these larger goals, though, because what’s on students’ minds is super practical: how to complete an assignment that’s breathing down their neck. How to find those five scholarly sources required. It’s a legitimate concern, especially in this age of anxiety when curiosity and exploration seem like a luxury. When you’re trying to figure out where you are in this new academic setting, just surviving may take up all your energy. When we talk about “student success” we’re not necessarily talking about lifelong learning and the purpose of liberal arts, we’re talking about the ability to perform well as a student, to write academic prose, format footnotes, and draw from scholarly sources without getting in trouble for plagiarism. That tends to push loftier goals to the side.

Wrestling with big ideas and with other's thoughts using methodical forms of argument can be an incredibly valuable learning experience, but it's the beliefs that underlie academic inquiry that are really important. Searching for truth ethically, with an open mind, without cherry-picking evidence to "prove" a preconceived answer, learning to live with complexity and ambiguity and feel some responsibility for doing that work – we need that kind of thinking badly. But I'm not sure that when students learn to write academic prose, citing academic sources the way scholars do in their publications, that the values implicit in that kind of writing are clear to them. And while this is nothing new, it seems especially pressing in this post-truth era, when words like "argument," "proof," "evidence," and "truth" are more slippery than ever and so often abused.

I have always wondered what parts of students' academic experiences matter after college. How does my work with students provide lasting value? Are they simply learning to use my library and our databases, are they becoming somewhat fluent in the use of academic phrases and styles of argument so they can do well in courses? Or do the values underpinning the specialized and complex language of researched writing actually reveal themselves to students as they do this work? I hope so. As they learn to think like historians, like scientists, like artists by engaging in the practices and methods of those fields they may learn along the way what makes for honest, rigorous inquiry – and why those values matter. By writing and conducting inquiry in a disciplinary framework they often gain the understanding that knowledge is a thing we make together, ideally learning that they have the agency to be a participant in making the world as we know it, and that they think about it as ethical activity that engages intellectual and moral virtues.

But there's troubling evidence that students compartmentalize the kinds of evidence wrangling and argument-building they do for academic tasks and what they do in their personal lives. I suspect the complexity of mastering academic writing can often obscures the basic moves of academic practice.



For

example, mastering APA or Chicago format can take up a lot of head space – so much so, that many undergraduates fail to see the utility of citations or know how to use their coded information to find information. Reading citations as a map of ideas is second nature to us, but they’ve grown up in a world of search, where the terms you type in will provide answers based on what you appear to want because the platforms they use are built with the assumption you are consumers shopping for things – and ideas are simply another kind of thing.

It’s difficult for students composing citations to see from that work that knowledge is a conversation, an ongoing collective process involving people wrestling with ideas together over time. My sense is that academics have so internalized the social processes and values of research that they forget the social nature of knowledge is not obvious to students. When they hear “include at least five scholarly sources” they don’t hear “because” – instead, it’s a shopping list, with possibly the name of the database-store they should

go to (or the shops they should avoid). When they create a list of references, it isn't a map of ideas and how they connect, it's a list of ingredients required by law, fine print nobody reads but the instructor, looking for technical errors.

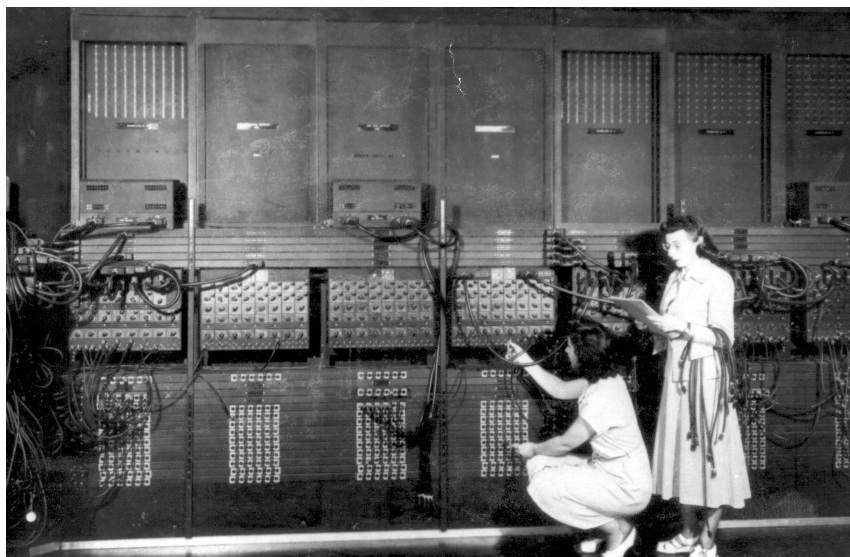
What does this have to do with post-truth? That tacit knowledge about how we try to arrive at the truth is incredibly important and is easily lost in the current information environment. We need to catch up to what's happening with information and bring that understanding into the classroom, into the ways students learn about inquiry and argument. This year I'm fortunate to be working on study with [Project Information Literacy](#), an independent non-profit research institute that uses social science methods to explore student experiences and beliefs about information. This is the largest body of research on how college students interact with information. In a report we plan to release in December, we'll be summing up ten years of findings and discuss where we go from here.

Some of the things we've learned from a decade of PIL research so far:

- Students find getting started especially challenging and time-consuming. This hasn't changed over the years. Notice, one of the reasons misinformation spreads so easily is lack of context.
- Most students use a small compass to navigate the plethora of information resources, using the same path – efficiency, utility, predictability. Google has made search incredibly convenient. So easy, you can ask your phone a question and get an answer in less than a second. If it takes time, students are inclined to think they're just doing it wrong, that they just didn't find the right search terms to find the perfect source.
- While a large majority of recent graduates surveyed believed they had transferred information skills from college to their lives now for searching and interpreting and applying search results far fewer agreed that college had helped them develop the ability to formulate questions of their own. Employers said recent grads had trouble seeing patterns and connections, and were reluctant to take a “deep dive” into a variety of information sources; the efficiency they honed in college to meet deadlines led them to skim the surface.
- The most recent study about how students engage with news found students learn about news in their classes and from their professors as well as from fellow students. They care about current events and

believe news is necessary for democracy and being informed is a civic duty, but have trouble navigating the deluge of news and knowing what to trust. Half of students said it was hard to know what was true and a third said they didn't trust any news sources.

We're embarking on [a new qualitative study](#). We'll be summing up what we've already learned from ten years of research to look for gaps in our current understanding, we'll be asking students and faculty what they know and think about the ways information flows are being shaped by "black box" algorithmic systems, and will be making some recommendations about what we might want to do to help students understand how information works in our and how they can participate in sharing and creating information responsibly as citizens in a changing and challenged world.



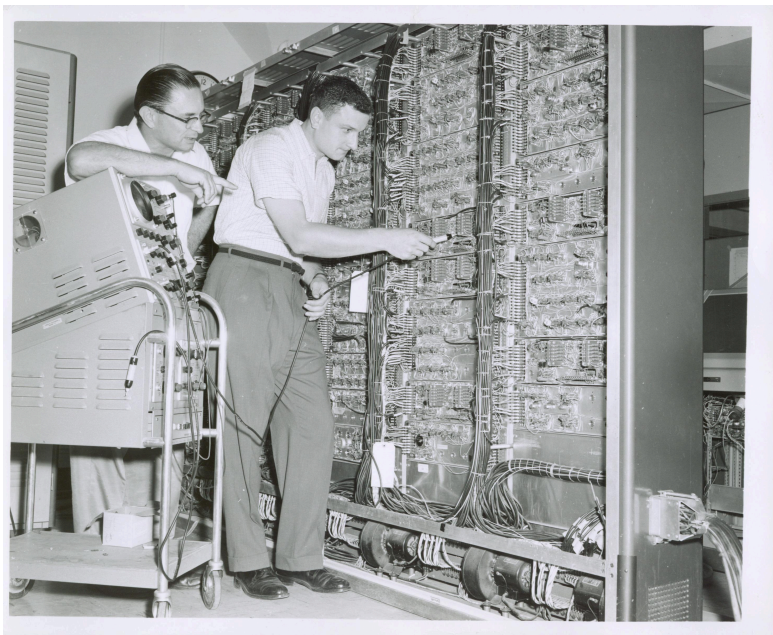
We want to get a handle on what students know and think about the fact that so much of the information we encounter comes through platforms that were designed for selling things – and not just consumer goods, but selling a political candidate, a political philosophy, or a message of hate. These platforms have honed technologies of marketing manipulation that are effective because they are able to gather and process massive amounts

of personal data, and they can conduct constant experimentation to see which messages have the most power for micro-targeted audiences. These are platforms our students use and know lots about – but we so rarely connect those experiences to what happens in the classroom. When we say “Age of Algorithms,” we’re not just talking about computer code, we mean an interlocking set of technical and social developments –

The systems we interact with most often throughout our day now that we carry computers in our pockets are built to keep us engaged, to stay on the platform clicking and sharing. They need that engagement [not just to serve ads](#), but to gather our data to personalize what we see. They want to know enough about us to predict our behavior (whether for shopping or voting), and they are able to nudge us toward the behavior they want without our being aware of it. Shoshana Zuboff calls this the Age of Surveillance Capitalism and is really alarmed about the implications for democracy and for human freedom and dignity in a world where these companies have so much power and wealth based on monetizing our lives, when we know so little about how we are being used.

In addition to platforms that we see and use regularly, there are some behind-the-scenes technological developments that are part of the Age of Algorithms. It’s possible now to rapidly and at vast scale collect and process fine-grained relational data in real time. That data, though, used to train artificial intelligence systems is often incomplete or biased, so they learn and actually amplify bias. This has an impact on who can rent property, get a job, or a long prison sentence. It also affects search engines, as Safiya Noble has pointed out in her book *Algorithms of Oppression*.

The scale of it all is pretty breathtaking. There’s just so much stuff being produced and shared, and its provenance is so hard to figure out, it’s really hard to ask those basic rhetorical questions: who is speaking? Who is the audience? What is the speaker’s purpose?



It's

not just technology, either. The giant corporations that dominate the list of largest global companies by market capitalization seem unable to anticipate or respond to unintended consequences, behaving according to deep roots in Silicon Valley culture, – indifference to or ignorance of perspectives different than those of affluent white males, a false belief in meritocracy, a global reach coupled with a lack of cultural understanding, and fundamentalist faith in individualism and absolute free speech. They don't turn to the scholarly literature about technology and society because it doesn't occur to them that scholarship can have value. A technology writer recently complained about how annoying it is for scholars pointing out the publications that address questions technologists pose. Scholarship is irrelevant because ideas are not valuable to “doers,” and besides who has all the money and power?

Bringing this closer to the classroom, the disaggregation of published information and its redistribution through search and social media platforms makes evaluation of what used to be distinct sources, like articles published in a particular journal or stories in a local newspaper, all the more difficult. This leads to an individualized presentation of information that sorts results based on inferences drawn from personal data trails. We don't all see the same information when we search and it's not obvious where it came from.

Decades of media consolidation, deregulation, and economic trends have been exacerbated by the rise of social media platforms that are designed for persuasion in ways that has contributed to engineered distrust of traditional knowledge traditions and the destabilization of political and social institutions globally.

But there are precursors to the technologies and contemporary culture of the Age of Algorithms that have been enormously influential in creating our post-truth moment. Our news environment has been bifurcating since lobbying ended the Fairness Doctrine and aided the rise of right-wing talk radio and Fox news network, which is a self-referential system that places less value on fact-checking than on adhering to and reinforcing a world view shared by its white conservative audience. [Network Propaganda](#) is a study of how supporters of Clinton and Trump shared news between 2015 and 2017. By creating maps of sharing patterns on social media and on the web, you can see the insularity of the right-wing news sphere. Information from the far-right fringes was picked up and amplified by Fox, with its large audience. Information on the far-left fringes failed to gain as much traction because its news consumers also valued mainstream news sources and traditional journalistic values and traditions – fact-checking, confirmation, issuing corrections when warranted. The study's authors concluded that what mattered most wasn't Russian interference or the impact of algorithms and filter bubbles but rather what they call a "propaganda feedback loop." What matters to the right-wing audience is consistency with their overall belief system. Whatever information far-left-wing publications presented was moderated for its audience by their reading of the mainstream press. Left-wing audiences rejected ideas that were contradicted by factual findings and traditions of traditional journalism. As New Gingrich explained to a rather baffled interviewer, it didn't matter if it was a fact that crime was down. What mattered was whether people felt crime was down. Feelings are factual; facts are merely theoretical. This rejection of facts is reinforced by declaring the press that isn't part of the right-wing feedback loop untrustworthy by definition.

So what we're faced with isn't a technology problem that can be fixed with technology. It's a social problem that has been exacerbated by a technological architecture of persuasion. If truth is not something you value, if all you care about is selling an idea, you'll have full command of the power of that architecture as we have seen, over and over, as the same inciting words and phrases circulate between 8chan, talk radio, Fox, the president's

Twitter feed, and the statements of mass murderers. Authority is redefined as adherence to a belief system rather than to methods or codes of ethics.

What makes it even more complicated is that evidence itself is embraced as material to be woven into coherent narratives – conspiracy theories in which individuals feel empowered to scour the web for material to fit into a narrative. “Self-investigation” is a way of dethroning traditional authorities while building a case for a flat earth theory or against vaccines, only calling on authority if it confirms the theory (which is why it’s so valuable for fringe elements to win coverage by mainstream media).

All of this makes it hard to know what to do. I’d like to leave time to share ideas about that, but here are some starting points that

- Connect and contextualize current events – look for ways to bring news into your courses and connect those events with disciplinary knowledge and knowledge-making methods. So much of our susceptibility to false narratives is rooted in lack of context. Connecting disciplinary ways of knowing and habits of thought to reading current events can also demonstrate the applicability of academic ethical inquiry to life beyond college.
- Model ethical information practices beyond academics – students in the news study assumed the driving motivation of journalists is to sell ads. They had no sense of the traditional divide between the newsroom and the business side of news organizations. They didn’t know journalists have a code of ethics. Some of that is youthful cynicism, but some is simple ignorance about how different kinds of information are created. So explore how peer review works in practice, how news is reported, how opinion and news have different editors and different functions, how it’s just as important in everyday life as in the practice of history or science to handle information with care and integrity.
- Build trust in info institutions and practices – we’re pretty good at what Peter Elbow called “the doubting game,” but we also need to help students believe in the value of truth-seeking institutions that have ethical values and tested methods for avoiding prejudice and falsehoods. By all means, point out failure points – the retracted science article, the news story that turns out to be horribly wrong – but also take some time to point out the social processes and values underlying good scholarship, good reporting, good and honest writing of all genres.

- Practice information encountering skills, not just search skills – we learned from Project Information Literacy’s news study that students feel continually bombarded with news, or as one student put it “News just throws itself at you. I don’t try to follow the news at all but it still throws its ugly self into my face on the daily.” When it came to school assignments, students sought sources, but were far more casual about evaluating sources they encountered. I think it could be helpful to discuss how you encounter sources in your own field and how to develop a curatorial sense for shaping the news feeds you use to keep up with both disciplinary knowledge and news given so much of what we know is thrown at us, not sought.
- Practice practical evaluation skills frequently – The heuristics we have typically used to help students evaluate sources don’t actually work in an information abundant environment. Many students get the message that scholarly sources are always safe, JSTOR is always a sure bet. Not everything we need to know is found in peer-reviewed research, and a lot of peer-reviewed research is not only inaccessible to non-specialists but not high quality. Using “peer-reviewed scholarship” as a binary sorting machine is tempting but not helpful in the long run. Neither are checklists that ask students to answer questions about a single source out of context. Is the author an authority? Is the publication reputable? How could students possibly know? Sam Wineburg of the Stanford History Education Group led an extensive study that found students were pretty bad at evaluating digital sources. A [second study](#), though much smaller, was even more interesting. He asked historians to evaluate digital sources and they were bad at it, too – close reading and primary source examination don’t really work for the web. Fact-checkers were much better at it. Drawing on those insights and the way digital works, Mike Caulfield has argued we need “[web literacy](#)” – easy heuristics for understanding information we encounter online that can help us make judgements quickly and without going down rabbit holes. His latest iteration of four moves [is available](#) in five adaptable 30-minute lessons especially useful for an introductory writing or information literacy course, but I would suggest using them in many settings, repeatedly, to give students critical habits that are easily transferable across domains.

Those are my first thoughts about what we might do, and we can carry on

the conversation. The main point I wanted to make is that our information environment has changed and is now optimized for spreading propaganda, disinformation, and creating a sense of helplessness, a sense that nothing can be trusted. We have to offer our students hope and build bridges between a clearer understanding of academic values and how we live in the world so that students are ethically and intellectually equipped to work to make it a better place.

image sources

“Human computer” (1940s?) via [NASA](#)

Two women programming the ENIAC computer (1946) via [Wikimedia Commons](#)

Two men working on a Census Bureau computer (1950s) via [Wikimedia Commons](#)

This Is Why We *Can* Have Nice Things

(A talk given at a symposium, Libraries in the Context of Capitalism, held at METRO New York, February 1, 2018.)

I've been thinking a lot about how what libraries do every day runs completely counter to the belief systems underpinning late capitalism, so I'm really looking forward to the conversations we'll have over the next two days about where we are in our communities, how we teach, how we can avoid reproducing capitalism, what John Kenneth Galbraith told us, how we can change publishing and critique our academic rewards system, how our labor is undervalued, how to organize, and finally, how to hope.

What I'll talk about this afternoon is the radical possibility of libraries and the ways in which the values we've developed over the decades could guide resistance to capitalist assumptions and agitate for change in our broader information landscape. I want to look back at how American libraries, especially public libraries, became an everyday fixture of communities, how our values evolved, and what we thought the future would hold – seeing how libraries have continually interacted with, adopted, and at the same time resisted capitalism.



In so many ways our libraries have been captured by capitalism despite our lofty values, ideals shrouded in the “vocational awe” that [Fobazi Ettarh](#) recently wrote about, which prevents us being uncritical of our profession and its operations because it's untouchably idealistic. There's a gap between what we do and what we claim to do

because we constantly make concessions, exchanging ideals for other perceived needs. For example, we might agree to “demonstrate our value” in terms that violate the privacy we purport to defend because we fear what might happen if we aren't valued. We want to teach critical information literacy but so often acquiesce to training students to be students rather

than free human beings because being liberated has less practical value and because we worry our students will be kicked out if they don't know the ropes. We aren't reflective enough about the concessions we make, and we may not even notice we're making them.

But what interests me more than what we do wrong is that *libraries ought not to be allowed to exist at all*. The very idea of a library runs counter to all of the principles underpinning our dominant understanding of human society. In the capitalist view, humans are individual entities motivated by self-interest and the market is not just the best mechanism for social regulation but is actually synonymous with “liberty” because it gives us freedom to want things (though not freedom *from* want). An entity like Google can organize the world's information – of course! It's a business. It produces wealth. Shareholders are rewarded. It doesn't need any further justification. But libraries? How can we justify taking tax dollars to create spaces where freeloaders can spend time without having to pay for the privilege? What excuse do we have for organizing the collective sharing of intellectual property? How is that even legal? Yet, here we are. We may feel underfunded, underappreciated, under threat. But unlike most social institutions these days, we're not under constant attack for simply existing.



One of the paradoxes of libraries is that they are well liked across all ages,

classes, and political affiliations. In part, that's because we are disguised as traditional and orderly community establishments that threaten nobody and uphold local values – all of them, across the board, even when they are in conflict. Unlike our public schools, libraries haven't been forced to compete against one another for resources, haven't been resegregated, and haven't been handed over to the private sector to be managed properly. (Though cities could outsource their library operations to LSSI, a for-profit corporation, very few have done so. Of over 9,000 public library systems in the country, only 19 are outsourced to LSSI – and this is after claiming to be the future, for two decades.) Unlike our universities, libraries haven't been widely criticized for elitism and indoctrination, nor have they been forced to fund themselves by requiring users to take on debt for expensive entrance fees. There is no other social institution that has so thoroughly escaped the tendency, cultivated since before the Reagan presidency, to believe government is the problem and private enterprise is the solution. There is no other community site other than, perhaps, city parks where the right and the left, the old and the young, the wealthy and the homeless can feel “this is mine. I belong here.” Libraries are generally seen as a good thing if not a harmless anachronism, but in spite of their benign image they embody a mission that by today's standards is radical.

At their best, librarians encourage public funding for resources held in common. They advocate for unlimited access for all to advance knowledge and the common good. They create programs to address community issues and needs. They provide lifelong learning opportunities and encourage a democracy of thought and culture. They help students learn how to find information and recognize propaganda while encouraging them to find their own voices as citizens who have the power to shape the world. And librarians, at least in the public arena, strive to ensure that all of these things are available to every single member of their community, regardless of age, income, gender, ethnicity, ability, or social standing.



These values, bundled up in a traditional and seemingly unthreatening package, present a powerful antidote to the market fundamentalism that has thoroughly infiltrated tech culture, the information industries, our political discourse, and the public sphere in recent decades. Though lord knows libraries have never been immune from systems of social injustice or the influence of market-based economic philosophies, their very existence reminds us that, as a society, we have the capacity and the will to establish community-owned platforms for the public good rather than for profit, that it's possible to nurture civic conversations that can open the borders between polarized groups, that knowledge is best treated as a common good rather than corporate property, and that sharing need not be paid for by revealing every detail of your personal life to data miners. Another world is possible. In fact, there's a model of it just down the street.

This should be impossible. We live in a world increasingly marked by precarious employment, disproportionate power held by monopolies, wealth concentrated at the top, and relationships within our communities unraveling as our nation becomes more diverse. In short, it's an era remarkably similar to the decades during which American public libraries first took root and began to spread, eventually becoming a common feature of most communities.



There are so many parallels. During the Gilded Age, large corporations owned by the super-rich had gained the power to shape society and fundamentally change the lives of ordinary people. New communication technologies, industrial processes, and data-driven management methods combined to draw workers into deskilled jobs. Laborers who once could take pride in their trade lost the sense of agency as they became cogs in a Tayloristic machine that treated workers as interchangeable parts. There were more consumer goods on the market but prosperity was an illusion for the majority. Mass layoffs were common. Workers who organized were violently rebuffed by state actors and business interests working in concert. Large companies grew even larger through merge



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industry consolidation. The state engaged in wars supported by false and hyped media reports. Panics driven by dubious global financial dealings and bank failures were followed by years of economic depression. The gap between rich and poor grew, with unprecedented levels of wealth concentrated among a tiny percentage of the population.

The changes weren't all economic. Gender roles were being redefined as women began to live and work independently. A wave of immigration changed national demographics. Native-born whites felt threatened, prompting a nativist backlash. Immigrants weren't the only victims of white rage. During this era, the hard-won rights of emancipated African Americans were systematically rolled back through voter suppression, widespread acts of terror, and the enactment of a punitive legal system. Indigenous people faced broken treaties, seized land, military suppression, and forced assimilation.

It all sounds very familiar. But it was out of this froth of conflict and division that the idea of the American public library, a publicly-supported cultural institution that would be free to all members of the community, emerged to become an uncontroversial staple of community life. How did that happen? And how did we come by our core values?

ACCESS, LIFELONG LEARNING



In the mid-nineteenth century, the idea of providing libraries to the public was embraced by wealthy men, the Bill Gates of their day, who used their philanthropy to stamp their good works with a particular world view, one that included those contradictions we still experience. The library was to be Free to All and dedicated to the Advancement of Learning – our core values of access to information and lifelong learning have deep roots – but that civilizing mission was intended to enhance the workforce, mold new Americans to a common culture and to ensure public order. Large urban public library

buildings carried ambiguous messages : ordinary people were as deserving as anyone to have sumptuous surroundings, but they had to accept the library's civilizing mission, which at first included limited opening hours, closed stacks, and highly curated reading materials designed to foster a singular American identity.

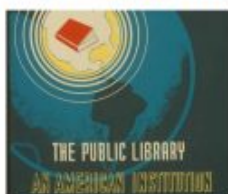
The Gilded Age figure most frequently associated with American public libraries is Andrew Carnegie. Between 1887 and 1917, about half of the public libraries built in the United States were partially funded by his philanthropy. Like today's Silicon Valley entrepreneurs, Carnegie believed his fortune was entirely the result of his work ethic and superior intelligence. In "The Gospel of Wealth" he argued the superiority of the self-made mega-rich endowed them uniquely with the capacity to make wise decisions for the deserving poor. (Sound familiar?)

Carnegie rejected the grandeur of palatial public buildings as excessive and indulgent, focusing much of philanthropy on utilitarian branch libraries in urban neighborhoods and small towns where the closest thing to elites were middle-class businessmen. (Though he intended these libraries to be free to all, he made exceptions in the south, where African Americans were not permitted to use the libraries their taxes paid for, though he funded a small handful of "colored branches.") His project was designed to operate on an industrial scale, establishing libraries throughout the country using a common set of designs, standards and processes. This business focus aligned with our early library "thought leaders." In 1897 John Cotton Dana argued libraries should reject fashioning themselves as a temple, a cathedral, or a "mortuary pile" but rather should be modeled on "the workshop, the factory, the office building." (He also described a book vending machine – probably in jest.) In 1901 Melvil Dewey suggested that as cheap as books had become, within 25 years academic libraries would encourage students to "cut up books freely for notes and scraps." I've often thought we are too quick to make our library websites look and act like shopping platforms, but I didn't realize this urge to commodify information for individual use went so far back. Then again, the ALA's original motto sounds like a prospectus for outsourcing: "the best reading for the greatest number at the least cost" – adopted in 1892 and (curiously) reinstated in 1988 during the twilight of the Reagan administration.

Carnegie's grants overlapped with a progressive impulse to bring opportunities to poor and working class citizens. These disparate motivations fueled the founding of libraries that provided access to books

and to reading rooms and to a variety of social and cultural programs, including English lessons for immigrants, folk dancing classes, art exhibits, public lectures, and children's programming – often prefaced by lessons in “hygiene” requiring kids to wash their hands before touching the books. Ever since we've seen libraries try to accommodate two conflicting goals: providing utilitarian value (preparing a workforce or enabling an individual's personal growth) and a sense of social responsibility (addressing civic issues, creating a welcoming community space for all). These aren't always in conflict, but they can be if we don't pay attention.

SERVICE, THE PUBLIC GOOD, SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY



Though Carnegie is given credit for the growth of public libraries it was women who really made it happen. Women's clubs eventually were responsible for starting as many as three-quarters of the nation's public libraries. They could get away with it because socially progressive work was aligned with the Victorian notion that men and women inhabited different spheres appropriate for their sexes. Commerce, politics, and waging war were the domain of men; women's work was with the family and in the home. As “new women” – women with college degrees and ambitions – began to have careers, their domestic sphere of influence expanded, but only so far. Jobs that involved promoting culture, social welfare, and the care of children – education, nursing, social work, and librarianship – offered women the chance to do paid work in public venues that didn't violate the boundaries of the male sphere but gave women meaningful roles in shaping society, sometimes in subversive ways.



Public libraries

developed their values in parallel to the Settlement Movement, also led by women, shifting from cultural uplift to becoming neighborhood-based social centers. This was also a function of the WPA library programs during the Great Depression, which employed over 14,000 people, built over 200 libraries, and funded programs such as the packhorse librarians who took books into the Kentucky mountains where there were no libraries.

INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM



Intellectual freedom was not a publicly-voiced value in the early decades. In fact librarians often thought their job was to guide readers, which meant censoring reading that was not “improving.” Many public libraries kept dangerous books in a special area called “the inferno” or “purgatory.” I briefly worked at a public library in Kentucky and remember finding an old shelf list card that listed a book’s location as “in the closet.” Library directors bragged about discouraging the reading of fiction. That changed as the people made clear they wanted a greater democracy of reading tastes represented in their libraries. Perhaps that prepared the ALA to adopt the [Library Bill of Rights](#) in 1939. It’s worth

remembering that the U.S. was not uniformly opposed to fascism in the 1930s, which shouldn't be surprising since our racist laws inspired Nazism. In that context, this statement supporting access to a wide variety of viewpoints and opposing censorship was a step forward. The [Freedom to Read](#) statement affirmed this stance in 1952 during Joe McCarthy's anti-communism campaign. Though we look back on this period with shame, McCarthy was a pretty popular figure – in 1954 a Gallup poll found half of Americans had a favorable opinion of him – so this wasn't necessarily an easy position to take.



Nazi Parade, Sussex Hills NJ, 1937

And it wasn't an obvious stance given the findings of a massive study commissioned by the ALA to study the purpose and effectiveness of public libraries. Led by social scientists, the Public Library Inquiry asked "How effective is the public library in cultivating intelligent loyalty to the basic conceptions and ideals of the democratic way of life?" It concluded it was failing. Not enough people used the library, and they weren't the right people reading the right books. The authors recommended libraries double down on their educational mission and remain technically free to all while concentrating on providing useful information to opinion leaders and do more to support business. If that was the future of libraries, the people weren't having it, and neither in the long run were librarians.

DEMOCRACY, PRIVACY, DIVERSITY



In the 1960s libraries fared well with new federal funding. Editorial Research Reports profiled the growth of libraries, opening with "The library, that once quiet refuge of children, old folks, and a small band of scholars, has become as busy as the local supermarket." But funding soon tapered off. The election of Ronald Reagan announced the importance of private enterprise over public services. Libraries experimented with charging for services, but the ALA resisted. In 1993, the association adopted a statement on economic barriers to information access, saying libraries should "resist the temptation to impose user fees to alleviate financial pressures, at long-term cost to institutional integrity and public confidence in libraries."

In the late 1990s many librarians were certain our patrons were abandoning libraries because Barnes & Nobles was so much nicer. This drove a wave of "merchandizing" libraries which led to some good things – more attention to comfortable seating, inviting book displays, and accepting that people could drink coffee in a library – but also led to public librarians calling patrons "customers" which alters the relationship of the library to the public it serves.

The rise of technology as the millennium approached caused a second wave of panic – what if people got information without our help? – which prompted the adoption of a statement titled "[Libraries: an American Value.](#)" It affirmed the importance of libraries for democracy in a digital age and encouraged libraries to serve the whole community in all of its diversity. A few years later, after the 9/11 attacks, the association passed a [resolution](#) opposing the suppression of access to government information and "the misuse of governmental power to intimidate, suppress, coerce, or compel speech." This, of course, was the moment when the FBI complained of

“hysterical librarians” leading the charge against a burgeoning surveillance state. We fall short on privacy in many ways, but we know better, and we’re at least talking about these conflicts when few information professionals are.

MEANWHILE, IN SILLY CON VALLEY...

Let’s switch over to the rise of tech culture at this point, because things were in play that would lead to “Google” becoming a verb and “share” would take on a new meaning altogether. What has happened makes a case that library values are more needed than ever – and not just in libraries.

We can see the roots of tech culture in the 1996 [“Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace”](#) in which John Perry Barlow argued that governments, which are by definition tyrannical, have no jurisdiction over cyberspace, which arose sui generis, without public investment. Here is the idealized notion of the internet as a place of freedom and equality and a libertarian faith that people will get along so long as there are no rules.

We are creating a world where anyone, anywhere may express his or her beliefs, no matter how singular, without fear of being coerced into silence or conformity . . . We believe that from ethics, enlightened self-interest, and the commonweal, our governance will emerge.

We all know how that’s turned out. Right from the start, freedom on the internet has been defined as “freedom to,” not “freedom from” and while it’s not stated, there’s a sense that everyone has the same opportunities, that meritocracy actually exists. Barlow also didn’t anticipate the evolution of the internet into a shopping and streaming platform with surveillance hardwired in.

Remember the hype around Web 2.0? This rebooted version of the web would give everyone a chance to participate in a vibrant, democratic conversation enabled by sites that had sharing and social capabilities baked in. The hacker ethic Barlow approved of – an ethic of making and sharing things in a decentralized, open online society – was folded into a world view in which capitalism, freed of government regulation and outdated management practices, would allow a new meritocracy of young (mostly white, mostly male) entrepreneurs to radically change society because they could. [This hubris](#) is how Ben Huh, who made a fortune turning I Can Haz Cheezburger into a media empire can launch himself into the work of creating new cities from scratch because, well, who needs expertise when you turned LOLCats into money? It's a twenty-first century version of Andrew Carnegie's "Gospel of Wealth." Not only is wealth a sign of superiority, it gives the anointed few the opportunity to make decisions for the rest of us. What we call the "tech industry" is really just entrepreneurs with buckets of venture capital using the advantages they have to dominate markets by casualizing labor and evading regulations, standards, and social norms.



Where things get especially spooky is in the rise of surveillance capitalism. The development of "big data" means information can be gathered in real time, in enormous amounts, with fine granularity, and processed quickly, enabling things we never dreamed of before we have a chance to say "no." We went, innocently enough, into Web 2.0 without realizing what was happening at the back end. Paying for a free platform with a few ads seemed a fair tradeoff.

Nobody mentioned we were enabling lifelong, ubiquitous datamining. This developed in step with state surveillance. Even immediately after 9/11, people rejected a government program to combine data sources for its “total information awareness” program as too invasive, too Big Brother. That surveillance became strangely more acceptable or at least inevitable after Facebook launched and we got used to being watched while being coaxed to self-market.

With artificial intelligence, the data industry is getting a new level of control. A company gathers license-plate location data and sells it to local police and [now to ICE](#), mapping people’s travels and predicting when and where they can be arrested. Algorithms are used to decide who gets a loan, a job, or a prison sentence. Companies and the state can identify our faces, our voices, our gait, and they can tell where we are and who we associate with while making assumptions about us based on behavioral data. All of this is being done without accountability, without auditing, without necessarily learning from mistakes, because it’s a trade secret.

These systems have a high error rate and have bias baked in. They can also be manipulated, and not just for political purposes. Some guy on Reddit has been [sharing instructions](#) on how to put any woman’s face onto bodies in porn videos. Zeynep Tufekci has said [“we’re building a dystopia just to make people click on ads.”](#) which to some extent is true. Facebook, Twitter, and Google seem as shallow as John Perry Barlow in their understanding of society and are shocked, shocked when their plans to make the world better are derailed by naughty behavior. But this dystopia is also built on the vacuum left when there is no ethical basis for a company or a state’s actions other than innovation, growth, power, and profit.

Back in the day, Carnegie had a selfish interest in building a better workforce and a more stable society through libraries, confident he was positioned to decide what was good for society. But he built public support for libraries into his plans, knowing that reliance on gifts and volunteerism wouldn’t be sustainable. Local control over those libraries and the evolution of values in our profession over 150 years have given librarians a perspective that needs to be applied to our entire information environment. Let’s ask hard questions. Let’s promote our values as guideposts for this terrible bind we’re in before it’s too late. Let’s take this message beyond our libraries.

I’m not saying librarians are exceptional. Like most people, we don’t live up to our aspirations. We value diversity, but can’t seem to figure out how to welcome people of color into a profession that is 87 percent white. We

value privacy but allow Amazon to track readers who borrow library-licensed ebooks and we put social media links on our websites, which serve as surveillance beacons for Facebook and Twitter. We value access to knowledge for all, but librarians who feel proud of creating well-equipped maker spaces with the latest in 3-D printers may not give much thought to residents in a neighboring community where the library can only afford a half-dozen aging computers. We're myopic, focused on local communities, but fail at thinking collectively. Librarians, no matter how forward-thinking or community-oriented, won't change the world by ourselves. What could save us is seeing, on an everyday basis, that another world is possible and already exists in small pockets of hope just down the street, a small-scale proof of concept model for a better world.



The idea of the public library was built on the optimistic belief that people are curious and socially responsible, able to make up their minds provided they have the liberty to explore a wide range of ideas and viewpoints without interference from autocrats or algorithms. People have proven they are willing to pay their fair share to make this experience available to all, at least at the local community level. Over more than a century, librarians have developed a set of guiding values that stand in stark contrast to the assumption that markets know best and freedom is just another word for consumer choice. Providing equal access to knowledge, standing up for intellectual freedom, protecting privacy, promoting diversity, democracy, social responsibility, and the value of the public good over private interests – these values scaled up could go a

long way toward changing our troubled world for the better. What libraries do every day is a statement of faith that we can, together, create a more just and equal society.

How would this actually play out? I'm hoping the rest of this conference will help me figure out some practical steps to take and some goals I can set for myself. What I hope is this:

- We will reflect critically on the compromises we make and fight against those that don't fit our values. We can say "no, we aren't going to spy on our students to demonstrate value, here's why, and here's how we're going to document our value differently." Take courage. Resist in small ways. Do it daily.
- We will join with others in the fight to take our information infrastructure back from corporate control. This means engagement in political battles about who gets access to the internet and on what terms, resistance to both government and corporate surveillance, and resistance to the use of proprietary black-box algorithms in making decisions about housing, health, education, and law enforcement. We should stay informed about these things and in turn inform our communities. We see information as systems, and we are trusted. Let's become irresistibly positive public agitators, recognized for our passion about our values, values that matter to everyone.
- We will be responsible citizens in our communities, allied in struggles for fair labor conditions, environmental stewardship, and human rights. We spend so much time talking to other librarians. What if we spent half of that time reaching out and making ourselves heard? If I spent as much time talking to my local academics about open access as I did venting to librarians, maybe I'd make a dent. If I turned my concerns about privacy into local workshops, maybe I'd help my neighbors. I don't know about you, but I don't find this easy. It takes me out of my professional comfort zone. It isn't what my workplace expects of me. It makes me nervous. But it's worth it, because our values are about so much more than libraries, and they could do a lot of good if we applied them more widely.

There is hunger for this kind of change. Ursula Le Guin said at the National Book Awards a few years ago

We live in capitalism. Its power seems inescapable. So did the divine right of kings. Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings. Resistance and change often begin in art, and very often in our art – the art of words.”

For us, it begins in our values: our care, our compassion, our belief in our own responsibility for the public good. As a profession we’ve had a century and a half to develop our guiding ethics. Google and Facebook have been in existence for less than two decades. Their stunted values are antithetical to ours. Since they and their kind are unwilling and incapable of fixing the problems they’ve created, the existence of libraries and the values they represent are a blueprint society could follow to demand change. At least, so I hope.



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Practicing Freedom for the Post-Truth Era

This is the text of a talk I gave on March 9, 2017 at the University of New Mexico sponsored by the Marjorie Whetstone Ashton endowment and the university library instruction team.

A PDF version can be downloaded from my library's [institutional repository](#) or from [Humanities Commons](#).

That shape-shifting phrase, “fake news” has been getting a lot of attention since the 2016 election and its equally puzzling precursor, the Brexit vote in Great Britain. For a short time, “fake news” was a term for those weird conspiracy theory narratives that were so compelling they led a man to “self-investigate” a pizza restaurant with a gun to rescue children who were supposedly being abused by an evil presidential candidate—a story that was simultaneously utterly implausible, entirely invisible to



those who would find it implausible, and common knowledge among a large subset of conservatives who share such narratives online. That was “fake news.” So was clickbait written specifically to generate ad dollars by talented East European teenagers who understood the way the commercialized internet works. But it didn’t take long for “fake news” to become a dismissive label for entire news organizations that publish stories that do the traditional work of journalism—holding the powerful accountable.

Traditionally, journalists acknowledge they are at best writing the “first draft of history” so mistakes happen, things are overlooked, and corrections have to be issued. But in spite of that, the mission is to seek the truth and



report it in a manner that is fair, independent, and publicly accountable. Critical news stories have made the current president uncomfortable to the point that he has declared press outlets that have reported news he doesn't like not just "fake news" but the "enemy of the people."

Fair warning: this is going to get political. But it's not just my own peculiar blue-state prejudices showing. The core values of librarianship are political these days, and standing up for them requires taking a personal position. Attacking legitimate news organizations as public enemies—their fighting words.

They're also historically fraught words. Enemy of the people. There's so much to unpack here. For some of us, it evokes a vague memory of an Ibsen play in which a man pays a high price for being a whistle-blower. He wanted to let people know water was contaminated, but moneyed interests and their entanglement with government overruled a scientist's urgent health



warning. For others who hear that phrase, it's tantamount to hearing a death sentence being pronounced. During the terror following the French revolution Robespierre announced political crimes including spreading false news should be punished by death. It was a phrase used by Stalin so frequently during his own post-revolutionary terror that Khrushchev in 1956 renounced its use as too tainted with its result: politically-motivated mass murder.

This phrase not only defines journalists as enemies, it raises the question of what we mean by “the people.” The People are those who the leader identified as genuine, patriotic, born of the homeland. The People are pure. The People are of one mind with the leader, who represents them. The enemy is anyone who outside the category of authentic People, a threat who needs to be discredited and vilified. There cannot be any disputation of the leader's truth because it's an attack on the People.

It's not clear if our current president knows these historical connotations of the phrase “enemy of the people” but during the campaign he made a point of demonizing the press—encouraging mobs at his rallies to turn on the press pen, quite literally, to jeer at and physically threaten them, even as he used the spectacle to get news coverage. More importantly, he has been willing to [state things that are demonstrably false](#) without any apparent concern that fact-checking will harm his credibility. While all politicians make promises they can't keep and deploy facts in deceptive ways in the service of persuasion, Trump shows unusual and cavalier contempt for the value of evidence in the formation of judgments. In part, he appears to draw heavily on advocacy “news” organizations ranging from the talk-show-format programs on Fox News, where the text of many of his Tweets

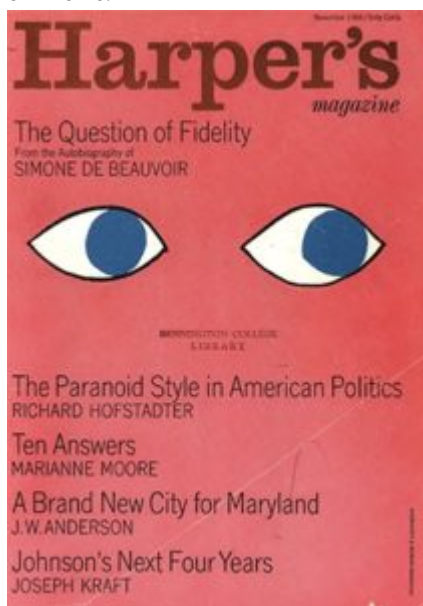
originate, to outright conspiracy theory sites that insist on things like the moon landing was faked, Sandy Hook was a hoax, and that the 9/11 attacks were an inside job. He is reportedly a voracious consumer of news, and his news consumption choices are just that: choices. He selects those sources that suit his world view and declares the rest false by fiat.

It's not so much that the president lies, though he does, exuberantly. He denies that the social institutions and practices that have developed since the Enlightenment to help us search for truth have any validity. He more or less has declared that truth-seeking institutions such as higher education, science, and journalism, are scams, or at best optional. The press is fake news. Global warming is a Chinese hoax. Higher education is left-wing indoctrination. And facts have no bearing because we have no agreement on what it takes to determine whether something is true.

A similar distrust led a narrow majority of Brits to vote to leave the European Union against the advice of all the experts. In fact, they voted to leave *because* of the experts. During the referendum, one Brexiteer made it clear the people—the true people—have had enough of experts, and so have a great many Americans. The idea of trust in expertise has become tainted as a scam perpetrated by elites against the people. And since the elites haven't fixed or even sufficiently recognized real problems—falling incomes, rising rents, increasing job insecurity, growing inequality—there's a lot of anger fueling general resentment about the way late capitalism has been playing out. Populist anger is being channeled by an appeal to bigotry. A man whose brand is luxury is bizarrely able to present himself as a man of the people in large part by declaring millions of Americans outside the circle of authentic personhood. Aliens. Enemies.

There are many reasons for this turn of affairs. Often people assume unenlightened beliefs are held out of ignorance and lack of education, but James Kuklinski and others (2000) have shown something more troubling: people who believe false things have plenty of information; the problem is, it's misinformation. They cling to a rich collection of "alternative facts," confident they are true, and they resist attempts to correct that misinformation. In fact, countering misinformation with a correction or a fact may reinforce belief in it, producing a "backfire effect" (Nyhan and Reifler 2010). The emotional dimension of how information is presented is a further factor. People are more likely to pass on information that gives them an emotional charge than because of its information value – and information passed from one weak social tie to another is a major form of news curation

today. Journalists have known about the power of emotional appeal forever, of course. That's why stories so often begin with an anecdote about a person readers will relate to typify a problem before the larger, more abstract issue is presented. Another factor that has strongly influenced our post-truth moment: The more choices people have among information sources, the more they [can select those](#) that affirm them and avoid those that challenge their views.

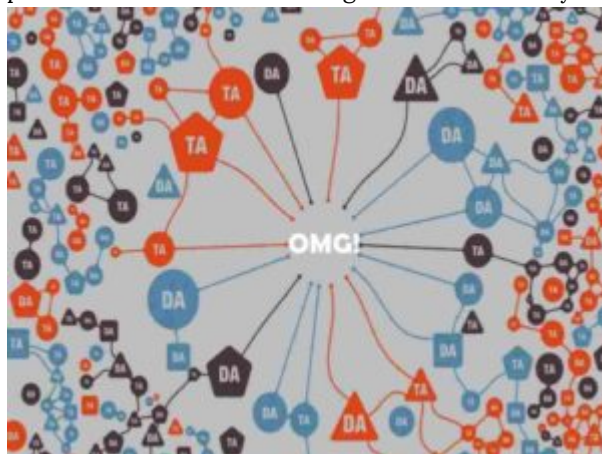


Richard Hofstadter famously described [“the paranoid style in American politics”](#) in 1964, tracing throughout our history a willingness to believe in conspiracies. These movements thrive on “heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy” during times of “suspicious discontent.” Hofstadter opens his essay with the observation that “American politics has often been an arena for angry minds,” nourished by an appetite for stories that have clearly defined enemies, that cast the to-and-fro of politics as a Manichean battle between good and evil.

Another curious feature of these battles is not that they lack facts, but that they are so full of them. “One of the impressive things about paranoid literature,” Hofstadter writes, “is the contrast between its fantasied conclusions and the almost touching concern with factuality it invariably shows. . . . The higher paranoid scholarship is nothing if not coherent—in fact the paranoid mind is far more coherent than the real world. It is nothing

if not scholarly in technique. McCarthy's 96-page pamphlet, *McCarthyism*, contains no less than 313 footnote references." This runs counter to Trump's blithe disinterest in evidence, but it will be familiar to anyone who has been involved in a comment or Twitter war. One of the techniques that makes comments sections so tedious is the frequent demands for proof, and more proof, coupled with niggling recitations of facts that attempt to disqualify the speaker with a vast accumulation of dubious, trivial, or irrelevant facts. It becomes a war of attrition.

Hofstadter published his essay during the year Barry Goldwater ran for president on a fringe right-wing platform. But Hofstadter denied that an appetite for conspiracies had a right-wing tendency, nor are they the purview of those who were ignorant or mentally susceptible. In his view,



it was a part of American mass psychology. More recent research has concluded that half of Americans of various political stripes believe in at least one conspiracy theory (Oliver and Wood 2014). The greatest appeal seems to be to those who believe some truth is hidden from them (usually by the state, though it could be the press or corporations) and that the search for truth is essentially a struggle between the good people and those who represent the forces of evil.

As a side note, the power of narrative is a fascinating aspect of this for me. I read a lot of fiction and sometimes I write it. Getting at emotional truth matters to me, even in made-up stories. In 1999 a psychologist, Richard Gerrig, published the results of some experiments that suggest we don't shelve fiction separately from non-fiction in our memories, and (even more interesting) we are most likely to believe ideas that come from works of fiction if we know very little about the subject matter beforehand. This

is why biblical scholars were so much more likely to giggle or gag when reading *The DaVinci Code* than the average reader was. Some studies have shown fiction to perform a valuable service in that reading fiction appears to enhance empathy and can increase familiarity and sympathy with cultures and issues that are outside of one's personal experience. But that power can also be used to misinform. Readers encountering something untrue in fiction may believe it and may insist that belief was encountered in a factual source before they encountered it in fiction.

Fiction can even be treated as authoritative. The first word in *The DaVinci Code*? "Fact." (None of his introductory disclaimer is true, though it's faithful to a bestseller that made claims so similar its authors [unsuccessfully sued](#) for copyright infringement.) A Michael Crichton novel, *State of Fear*, deliberately portrayed the science of global warming as a scientist-led conspiracy (and included a lengthy bibliography to prove his fiction was correct). A US senator chairing the Senate committee on Environment and Public Works [made it](#) "required reading" for committee members, and he called the author to provide expert testimony. One recent set of experiments has suggested that facts learned from fiction (including incorrect facts) are more likely to be recalled than facts learned from non-fiction sources (Marsh et al 2003). So we have plenty of evidence (if you believe in that sort of thing) that stories of all kinds influence us, and since many of us prefer our stories to be clear about who are the good guys and who are the bad guys, it can be all too easy for us to fall into oversimplification of complex realities.

So we live in a confusing world, where neither the CRAAP test nor extensive LibGuides will cure our susceptibility to misleading, inaccurate, fictionalized, politicized narratives that are so prominently in the news these days. What I want to focus on this morning is how we can take this moment of truth (or rather this moment of post-truth) and use it to test our thinking about how we teach our students about information and how it works. The big question for me is: What do we really want our students to take with them when they graduate? What knowledge and habits of mind matter for the long term? Where do we put our efforts while these students are with us, and does information literacy even matter at a time when the entire notion of a commonly-agreed-upon reality is in doubt? I'm going to focus particularly on undergraduate education and on how librarians and faculty in the disciplines can work together, but ultimately the question I want to pose today is "What kind of learning in college is transferable, not just to the

workplace but to our lives as free human beings and citizens of a troubled world?”

Librarians have what I feel are [a potent set of values](#), values that are salient today: providing equal access to knowledge for all, defending intellectual freedom, protecting privacy as a condition necessary for the exploration of ideas without fear, championing diversity, democracy, and social responsibility, all while promoting the value of the public good over private interests. Pretty radical stuff. Pretty valuable, given what we face today.

These values developed over time, but it's interesting to me that the American public library originated during an era of great wealth inequality, consternation over immigration, declining incomes, the growth of a super-wealthy class, new communications technologies, the concentration of power in a few giant corporations, deskilled, underpaid, over-mechanized labor . . . it all sounds very familiar. Yet for whatever reason this was the moment when thousands of communities decided they should have public libraries, publicly-funded places where anyone could find information to better themselves. (A restricted definition of “free to all” comes into play, unfortunately; many public libraries, including those in the Jim Crow South, served only white patrons, with only a few southern cities offering “colored” branches.) About half of public libraries founded during this time were partially funded by Andrew Carnegie, a great believer in the physically-impossible bootstrap theory of personal development; a majority of libraries were founded through the work of middle class white women, who at the time were restricted in what kind of work they were allowed to do, but took a special interest in social welfare projects that fell within a broadened interpretation of their “domestic” sphere; see Schlesselman-Tarango 2016 and Van Slyck 1995. There were a lot of contradictions in the late nineteenth-century idea of a public library, but one unifying belief came to be called “the library faith.” Perhaps the first articulated value of American librarians was that free public access to information would benefit all, both for self-directed education and improvement but also as a defense of freedom and the commonwealth.

An early conflict that had to be resolved was who should decide what information was beneficial to the masses. Many librarians felt it was important to provide improving books. Fiction—particularly popular series fiction—was considered by many to be harmful and even dangerously addictive. Some librarians as a result actively practiced forms of censorship at first, refusing to stock popular titles because they might cause harm. In

1896, the director of the Allegheny, Pennsylvania public library raised this issue in his [annual report](#), writing “It is certainly not the function of the public library to foster the mind-weakening habit of novel-reading among the very classes – the uneducated, busy or idle – whom it is the duty of the public library to lift to higher plane of thinking.” Melvil Dewey was fine with women working as librarians—they were cheaper to employ than men, for one thing—but he doubted they were capable of book selection themselves and suggested they base their choices on reviews written by qualified critics. He fought with his vice-director at the library school he founded, Mary Salome Cutler, who taught courses on literature that he considered unnecessary frills for an educational program that should emphasize efficient management, not independent judgment (Weigand 2015).

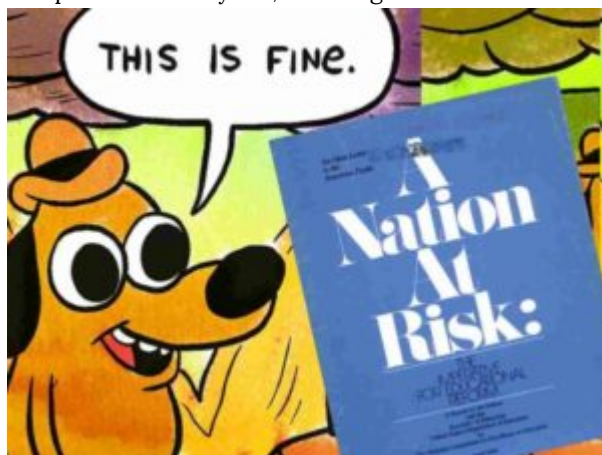
In the end, censorship lost and the people won. The public library and its librarians came to terms with the fact that self-improvement comes in many forms, perhaps best defined by the reader, and libraries ended up nourishing a democracy of tastes while continuing to claim that access to knowledge promotes democracy. In fact, librarians (particularly public and school librarians) got used to defending choices that some find objectionable. This role of defending a diversity of thought was codified first in the [Library Bill of Rights](#), written by an Iowa library director in 1938 in response to the rise of fascism, and adopted by the American Library Association in 1939. During the McCarthy era librarians and publishers jointly authored the [Freedom to Read Statement](#) that strongly positions libraries as defenders of democracy not because they provide correct facts but because they provide a wealth of differing viewpoints. The statement claims “democratic societies are more safe, free, and creative when the free flow of public information is not restricted by governmental prerogative or self-censorship.” The statement concludes, “ideas can be dangerous; but that the suppression of ideas is fatal to a democratic society. Freedom itself is a dangerous way of life, but it is ours.”

The role of the academic library has a less fraught history than the public library. Of course libraries support education. Of course we should offer researchers a wide variety of ideas. Of course we should help students navigate all of this wealth of knowledge. Except now we are expected to ensure we have lots of metrics to prove our value because we can’t assume value, we have to prove it. It all comes down to return on investment. This metrics mind-set, coupled with an austerity regime, has contributed to what

I worry is a real problem that will make it harder for us to address the challenges of a post-truth era.

When I started work at my library thirty years ago, we believed in something akin to the “library faith.” We called it bibliographic instruction. The idea was that libraries and librarians could make higher education richer and more meaningful if students were encouraged to make their own discoveries and come up with their own original problems to research. We assumed the habits and skills they gained along the way would be valuable after college. Graduates would be able to find information and evaluate it as they went on to wherever their future led. Framing questions, locating and evaluating evidence, using it to make up their minds or construct an ethical argument—surely that was preparation for life-long learning and for lifelong engagement in civil society. We took it as an article of faith, though we had little research to prove it. It was a given.

Our faith was shaken as computers came along, so we changed up our language and argument in response. In 1983 [a government report](#) scared the pants off everyone, claiming our schools were deficient to the point



that it was a matter of national security to reform them. It was the information age. Computerization threatened jobs. Japanese technical and managerial innovation threatened our global dominance. Libraries and other institutions that fed lifelong learning wouldn't matter if education wasn't reformed. Librarians to the rescue! In 1989 two authors, Patricia Senn Breivik and E. Gordon Gee offered a solution. It was time for a revolution in the library and it would be called information literacy. They argued that information, which was multiplying like some dangerous virus at a phenomenal rate, was

a threat to the average person: “none can escape the ongoing effects of the information society on their lives, on their ability to survive if not succeed at their jobs, and on their success in living a meaningful life.” But librarians, as information experts, could guide the way provided they partnered with university leadership to revolutionize undergraduate education.

This is our challenge to academe and to college and university presidents in particular—to take up the difficult task of reform, to find a center that holds in the fragmented world of scholarship and education. . . . Be resolute in using your leadership skills to free your library personnel and resources from outmoded images and unrealistic expectations until they can become powerful allies in the work of reforming your campus. Then the goal of fully preparing young people for the challenges of the information society will become a reality (p. 199).

I remember reading the book at the time and feeling slightly annoyed. The implication was that faculty were falling down on the job, but higher administrators and librarians working together could shake things up. The faculty I knew tried hard to make learning meaningful. They weren't the problem, and I didn't know too many administrators who actually used libraries. It was always a challenge to connect with faculty in the disciplines and work together to help students become fluent and finding, judging, and creating information, but edicts from the head office would not help, at least not in my experience.

One thing that did change: faculty members who thought library sessions were unnecessary—after all, what was so hard about looking up books and scholarly articles?—were suddenly contacting me, asking for help in evaluating websites. Being diplomatic, I didn't say students had exactly the same challenges evaluating printed information as they did websites, but that insecurity among faculty gave me a ch



ance to increase our partnership. The common definition of information literacy, which actually predated the Web, became common currency. Students needed to be able to identify an information need, find and evaluate sources, and use them ethically, whether those sources were on a shelf, in a database, or on the open web.

During this time, another change was underway. I found a reference to it buried in a throwaway paragraph in an article published in 2008 that replicated a study conducted twenty years previously examining mistakes made by hundreds of first year college writers from multiple institutions (Lunsford and Lunsford 2008). In the 1980s, most writing assignments in the first year were fairly short personal narratives. The focus was on learning how to express ideas clearly. In the mid-2000s, students were being assigned much longer papers that emphasized research and argument. Was this partly due to the success of librarians making claims that the library was an important site of learning? Or was it because the information age had happened and we were drowning in the stuff?

I am not sure, but I am convinced of something else: all of that research in the first year is not making our students automatically information literate. The woeful results of another major multi-institutional first year writing study, [The Citation Project](#), suggests that students are learning how to find things. (Indeed, the findings of [Project Information Literacy](#) confirm that students aren't relying on web searching alone, that they are nearly as likely to search library databases for sources as they are to use the web.) What they aren't learning is why it matters. When required to write papers using sources, the first year students observed in this study tended to quote or paraphrase lines of text rather than summarize an argument. In most

cases, the text they quoted or paraphrased was from the first or second page of the article—why read any further once you’ve found the bit you can use? The quotes were often taken out of context and weren’t reflective of the source’s overall argument. And the kicker? There wasn’t much original writing in these papers. They were pastiches of quoted material. This is not information literacy.

Honestly, this should come as no surprise. Writing from sources has never been a particularly effective feature of first-year writing. Back in the 1980s, when writing assignments that required sources were less common and cutting and pasting involved scissors and glue, students used similar strategies. One researcher, Jennie Nelson (1994), looking at hundreds of papers, saw very similar results. Three quarters of the students she studied used a “compile information” approach. Ten percent started with a thesis and sought out sources that would support it. Another ten percent found sources and coaxed a thesis out of them. Only five percent engaged in the recursive process of reading and questioning that writing instructors promote. Nelson described how one student she interviewed, who had been terribly anxious about a paper and procrastinated, so was writing it the night before the due date, made an outline something like this: green, brown, beige, red, green. Those were the colors of the books she planned to quote in the order in which she would quote them. And once she’d found those books and chose a topic, her stress level dropped. She explained that, since it was a research paper, she didn’t have to write anything herself, she simply had to organize and copy material. Of her 1,300 word paper, 1100 were direct quotes. This wasn’t information literacy, either.

One of the problems with trying to squeeze too much procedural knowledge into the first year writing course is that this teaching is often being performed by low-wage academics with little power to shape the curriculum beyond the first year experience and librarians who are trying to squeeze a lot of learning into a small window of opportunity. The combination of shifting the cost-burden from the state to students and the institutionalized suspicion that has insisted that we prove our value at every turn, has combined to do something rather odd: we put all kinds of emphasis on “student success” rather than on . . . what to call it? Human success? So much of our effort is geared toward making students into better students. I’m all for helping students succeed. We owe them that. I simply question whether the purpose of higher education is to turn people into college students. Or, for that matter, into biologists or sociologists or chemists,

when most students graduate and do something other than what they majored in. Nor am I interested in turning students into people who have learned how to follow instructions well enough to become biddable workers. Call me radical, but that doesn't seem to me to be the reason we do this.

So why do we care about students learning how information works? Can we even help them understand the way information works in an era of fake news, algorithmic segregation, and institutionalized suspicion? It seems to me terrifically important that librarians take seriously three separate but important functions.

We need to help students new to the university make it. We owe it to them to make the mysteries of higher education less mysterious and terrifying. We need to welcome them into the library and into the academic life. In the words of David Bartholomae, we have to help them invent the university. I'm not entirely convinced it's a form of learning that matters, but it is a survival skill.

The second function we need to serve is to help students who have chosen a major understand the values and the discourse conventions of that major so that they can participate in disciplinary conversations and see how they work. There's a risk that this work could become a kind of etiquette lesson rather than deep and lasting learning, but it's in the major typically where students get the opportunity to dig deep and see knowledge being made using certain tested methods and established rhetorical moves. This is when students have enough of a knowledge base to see how the intellectual sausage is made. At this point, they have the opportunity to wrestle with unsettling concepts: knowledge is made by people like them. Everyone's view is partial; sharing perspectives can help us see farther. Every exchange of information requires judgment. Research is recursive and non-linear. What you learn will cause you to ask new questions. You will encounter things that call into question things you believed to be true, and that can be uncomfortable. It's okay to stick your neck out. You have a voice and something to say. Learning to ask genuine questions, gather evidence ethically, and organize a complex argument can help students understand not just how to find, evaluate, and use information, but can transform their understanding of their place in the world of knowledge.

Finally, and I feel this is more important than ever but most neglected of these tasks, we have another role: to help our communities think about why we engage students in this kind of learning and consider what is transferrable knowledge. How does the experience of presenting a poster

session on a chemistry experiment at a conference or of writing a senior thesis about Victorian literature prepare students for the world they will graduate into, a world where we not only have an abundance of misinformation and distortion, but very little common ground when it comes to basic beliefs about what we know and how we know. We've heard a lot about how this kind of learning actually contributes toward workplace readiness. Workers need to be able to find information, weigh evidence, communicate clearly, and complete tasks. What has gotten less attention is how this kind of exploration and critical thinking prepares our students to engage with the world as citizens and perhaps change it for the better. There are signs they are up for the task—but I'm not certain we are.

One challenge is that we spend a lot of time explaining libraries and their systems without connecting them to larger information systems. Library websites are basically a slightly baffling but supposedly upscale shopping platform, offering a wealth of options for students to choose from. Working from the premise that more is always better, we work hard to expand the number of things you can find with big deals, aggregated databases that include a random selection of full text journals, and discovery layers that pull results together from many sources. If you look at your stats, you'll probably find that a huge percentage of the full text journals available to your students never have a single article downloaded from them. When studying the use of an aggregated database at fourteen colleges several years ago (Fister, Gilbert, and Fry 2008), we found forty percent of the full text publications had zero use at all fourteen colleges in two years. Effectively, we subsidize the publication of journals nobody uses so that we can offer the illusion of lots and lots of consumer choice. Of course, those choices keep getting more expensive, so we stop buying books and cancel journals that aren't in the package, sacrificing access to the small and the quirky, sacrificing any information that isn't packaged into a corporate deal.

Our systems are being asked to provide the ease and attractiveness of new and ubiquitous advertising platforms. There were good lessons to learn from Amazon and Google, reminders that "save the time of the user" is just as important now as it was when Ranganathan included it among his five famous rules of librarianship. But assumptions underlying database design were too often rooted in the idea that searching for information was a consumer activity. It implied our job was to help students shop efficiently for sources to put together in a paper just as they might shop for clothing to put together an outfit.

The rise of a critical sensibility in thinking about information literacy has come at a time when late capitalism is crumbling around us. The shock of the 2008 financial crisis showed how brittle the foundations were. The unfairness of an economic and political system that claimed to be regulated through the invisible but cosmically beneficent hand of market forces has become glaringly obvious. One successful political response has been to strategically direct inchoate anger to focus on “elites” and encourage distrust of “experts” which extends to hostility toward institutions of higher learning and to entire systems of producing new knowledge, including scholarship, science and journalism. White supremacists have been able to seize the moment and focus this anger not on the captains of capitalism but on immigrants, Muslims, women, people who don’t conform to a rigid gender binary, and racial minorities.



It was only after the 2016 election in the U.S. that the algorithms that shape our view of the world—the trade-secret spying and sorting and sifting that Facebook and Google have engineered to tempt consumers to respond to advertising—have been called to account as a political force. These companies have consistently denied any responsibility for the often-dubious content they promote while designing systems to profit on its spread.

This is a serious crisis of legitimacy. Institutions that failed to stem growing inequality and the effects of global capitalism have been designated elites and enemies of the people.

Librarians have, quite understandably, as when we first worried about the information age, positioned themselves as a solution to the crisis, rushing in with CRAAP tests and LibGuides and lesson plans on how to spot fake news. But this is not enough. The problem isn’t spotting falsehoods, it’s that a large percentage of our population has lost faith in the very idea that we have a shared reality and that we have developed a common set of tested methods we can use to understand it. We also have little wide-spread knowledge of how tools we use every day actually work and why in so many ways the exacerbate misinformation. We need a thoughtful, critical approach

to information literacy that goes beyond thinking like a college student, thinking like a history major, thinking like a worker, but rather thinking like a free human being who has the capacity to make change.

Though it would be a mistake to promote libraries as arbiters of facts, this is a good opportunity for us to invite our faculty colleagues to discuss exactly how these things we ask students to do—keep lab notebooks, write literature reviews, compose fifty-page senior theses—prepare them for life after college. It's not obvious. Rather than fall back on talking points about education as preparation for the workforce, it's time to reflect in concrete ways on how these learning experiences prepare our students for a fulling life as citizens in a troubled world. (Admittedly, this won't be a winning argument with legislators, but it's something educators should take seriously.) And if these things we do don't provide that preparation, we need to ask—what should we be doing?

The neoliberal economic policies and libertarian politics embraced by tech tycoons have inadvertently created a system for promoting falsehoods and undermining the sense that Americans have something in common. Google tweaks its algorithms constantly, but recently claimed it had to be neutral and couldn't interfere when the top search result for the query “did the Holocaust happen?” was a neo-Nazi site that answered the question with hateful lies. When critics suggested the false news stories shared on Facebook influenced the 2016 election, the company denied responsibility, insisting it's not a news organization, it's simply a platform – a platform that has become a major news source for many of its 1.6 billion users.

Though Google's stated mission is “to organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful” and Facebook claims “to give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected,” both companies are actually in the advertising business, selling the attention of their users to third parties. In order to maximize ad placements, they create cocoons of similarity where people settle comfortably into like-minded communities. When the same search query produces different results for people based on their profile and location, the idea that we're operating in a shared reality is hard to sustain. When a social platform feeds us information designed both to sooth and stimulate us in order to keep us clicking to feed the platform's inexhaustible hunger for personal data, it undermines the civic benefit of exposure to multiple viewpoints. When propagandists take the place of news organization, the first draft of history is rewritten as self-serving speculative fiction.

Even authoritarian states get into the act. Russia's talented coders have not only engaged in cybercrime, they have flooded social media with disinformation and abuse flung at those who criticize their leader or express support for his designated enemies. Automated propaganda accounts on Twitter and Facebook that tirelessly send out computer-generated messages have been used in several countries to influence public opinion. [One study](#) estimated some 400,000 "bots" sent out computer-generated Tweets related to the 2016 election, each account spewing thousands of messages daily and accounting for about a fifth of election-related Twitter content. They can be coded cleverly enough to appear human as they identify and amplify messages while swarming and drowning out the voices of their masters' opponents.

By entrusting our information infrastructure to profit-driven and unaccountable companies and their shareholders, we've forfeited a shared understanding that truth can be sought using methods that are designed to reduce bias to create a common understanding grounded in reality, not personal choice. The intellectual freedom that libraries value is built on Enlightenment ideals and the optimistic belief that people are curious about the world and are able to make up their own minds provided they have the liberty to explore a wide range of ideas and viewpoints. The fact that libraries are local institutions rather than global profit-driven enterprises grounds that faith in a commitment to provide all Americans equal access to the same foundation of knowledge.

So what can we do in a practical sense?

Psychologists have offered some suggestions about how understanding the cognitive factors that make people resistant to having their misinformation corrected (Lewandowsky et al. 2012). Some of this is common sense. Don't repeat misinformation repeatedly as you try to debunk it, but instead emphasize the facts you wish to convey. Consider what gaps in people's mental event models are created by debunking and fill them using an alternative explanation. Consider how your audience might feel threatened by an explanation, and seek a way to make it affirming in some way. Tell stories that are emotionally compelling for your audience that improve their understanding, or expose people to stories that boost empathy. And of course use the [On the Media "breaking news consumer handbooks"](#) liberally.

As librarians, we have more tools at hand than LibGuides and one-shots. We have literal places—large buildings—where we can promote our values:

democracy, diversity, intellectual freedom, privacy, the value of lifelong self-directed learning. We can plant reminders everywhere, in book displays, on white boards, on our websites, in programs. We have [a lot of social capital](#) we could be spending. Libraries have higher credibility across political divides than almost any social institution. Let's use that good will to bring people together. Help our campus communities understand the ethical decisions that go into making good research and why these ethical choices matter. Help them understand how Facebook works, how ad networks work, how Big Data is being used to sort us into malleable categories and what's wrong with that picture. Reject neutrality. Become activists for our values, and do what you can to help our faculty think about their role in preparing their students for a troubled world. Simple solutions won't solve this crisis, but I'm convinced the values librarians have developed over the years are exactly what this moment needs. Let's go forth and practice them.



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System Restore: Bringing Library Values to Today's Information Networks

(Talk given at a conference of the Private Academic Library Network of Indiana in June 2018, which had a CSI theme that year.)

Thanks so much for inviting me to speak to you today. Full confession: I have never watched an entire episode of CSI Anywhere. I turned an episode on years ago but just couldn't get over the fact that people who do forensic work for police investigations aren't actually detectives and that few investigations use all that science because it's too expensive. In fact, I'm such a feminist killjoy that it bugs me that we pretend we have scientists on hand to solve crimes when there are hundreds of thousands of untested rape kits sitting in evidence rooms across the country because DNA testing is too expensive and so many police organizations would rather spend the money on facial recognition systems and predictive policing schemes than on actual crime victims. Which is actually kind of related to what I want to talk about today.

But first, I may not watch CSI, but I read and review a lot of crime fiction. Sometimes I even write it, so you'd think I wouldn't be such a downer. Entertainment has value and fiction is fiction, but the stories we tell ourselves for entertainment matter. Good crime fiction has the potential to give us imaginary space to think about how things go wrong and gives us practice having empathy with characters in those situations. At the same time they are popular because they also suggest things can be set right. They leave us having hope that the arc of the moral universe bends toward justice.

This morning I want to talk about how libraries can help that arc bend toward justice. Now, librarians aren't superhuman or magical, and we make a lot of mistakes. But the values we've developed over the past 150 years or so matter now more than ever. Just as the CSI television franchise suggests science can solve crimes with dazzling technology that erases human error and unlocks secrets without worrying about cost, we're living in an era of dazzling technology where we can use the computer in our pocket to organize mass movements, settle a bet in seconds, turn down the

thermostat, or document a crime in progress, Tweet it, and see it later on the evening news. It all works like magic – kind of like libraries for those who use them but have no idea what labor is involved, how much it costs, or all the decisions that have to be hammered out in the background.

The CSI in PALNI means being collaborative, strategic, and innovative – all great ways to encourage one another to get stuff done and help each other out. But let's take a step back from those three words that focus on ways to get stuff done and think about *why* we want to get stuff done, and why our values, library values, matter in the broader context of today's information landscape. In particular, I want to explore what it means in our current socio-technical moment to care about these values, all of which are important in different and intersecting ways and all of which are so terribly lacking in so many of our Silicon Valley-produced information systems. Systems that seem to be failing us in some new way every day.



So, let's look at [our values](#): access, preservation, intellectual freedom, privacy, diversity, democracy, life-long learning, service, social responsibility, and the public good. If you are a serious student of the ALA website, you might notice I left "professionalism," one of ALA's core values, off this list because it seems to refer to status and educational requirements, which makes it less relevant to the wider world and also seems to defend divides in the labor that goes into making libraries work. But the argument I'm going to make this morning is that library workers, regardless of status or educational background, have

collectively developed and often practiced a set of values that matter, and whatever our rank, we should advocate for them, not just in our libraries but in the world. What I want to discuss how these values, rooted in our history and in our day to day experiences or maybe just in our aspirations, matter at this moment, in June 2018.

Let's start with access. We seem to live in a world of too much information, but getting access to it may be the thing most of our community members care about when they think of our libraries. I need this article, or (if you're a student) I need five peer-reviewed articles. Can I get this book? How do I get around this paywall? A lot of our budget and labor go into providing access to materials that are scarce and expensive by design or because of historical circumstance. At the same time, because equal access to information is something we value as a profession, we want to make that scarce information available to all, not just to our immediate community. When we promote open access publishing and run institutional repositories we're not trying to save money, we're trying to help research make a difference. In short, though we're living in an age of abundance, we still have help to help people get to the things they need, and we want more people to have that access whether or not they are in our immediate community.

Abundance ≠ Access

Despite all of this effort to make information available, we too often hear from people who don't use libraries, "why do we even need libraries anymore when you can just Google it?"

We might say "well, actually, we spend bundles of money of getting stuff for our communities," but we also want to say "and wouldn't it be great if everyone could get that expensive stuff?" Does that mean we think a world where everyone will "just Google it" is how we ideally will provide access someday?

Let's think about that. What do we really mean when we insist "access to information" matters?

Every day, according to various estimates, [1.45 billion people log into Facebook](#) to share photos and links. [Half a billion Tweets are sent](#). A [billion hours of video content are watched on YouTube](#). Google responds to [over 3 billion search requests](#) using the 130 trillion webpages it has indexed. In addition to all that free stuff, [over 6,000 scientific articles](#) are published daily, some freely accessible, some not, and [over 6,000 books](#) are published, not counting those that are self-published. Doesn't that suggest libraries are small potatoes when it comes to accessing information?

Well, it's complicated. This abundance we experience is delivered through a small handful of monopolistic platforms that don't create or generally pay for content themselves but decide who gets to see what using proprietary systems. Though they hold their algorithms close to their chests, we've learned the hard way they can be gamed in ways that lead to a tidal wave of misinformation, election results warped by foreign and domestic mischief makers, and [genocidal violence](#) fanned by the flames of Facebook messages and groups. As a handful of companies corner the market on attention, they make it hard for creators of content – newspapers, for example – to have a viable business model; Google and Facebook virtually own the digital advertising market by buying competitors and developing better targeting mechanisms for the largest audiences. Besides, these systems promote engagement through emotional triggers rather than reflection. If you let YouTube decide what you might want to watch next, you'll soon find yourself in the uncanny valley, watching extremist propaganda or extreme weirdness – or both. That's how their curation works. They keep upping the attention stakes at the expense of more moderate or thoughtful content.

When the internet was new, search was difficult, publishing to the web was hard, and even getting online could be complicated, but for the hearty few who figured it out, it seemed freeing. Now nearly everyone is online, but they tend to go there through Google, Facebook, and a handful of additional proprietary platforms with a global reach. For a large portion of the world's population the [only internet access available is filtered through Facebook](#) and a few select sites, except in China where Baidu, Tencent, and Chinese regulations have tempered their dominance – for now.

Besides, this abundant future is unevenly distributed: [Nearly half](#) of Americans who are low income, minority, or live in rural areas lack broadband internet service at their homes even as it becomes more vital for employment, government services, and education. The percentage of Americans who [rely on phones](#) as their connection to the internet is significantly higher among African-Americans and still higher among Latinos than among whites. If you're poor, there's a good chance you'll run short on your data plans before the end of the month, and at times you'll have

to cancel service altogether because it costs too much.



Access, one of the first library values to be articulated – to freely provide information to all – may seem outdated with so much information available than ever before. But neither Google nor Facebook, despite their feel-good taglines, are guided by a well-developed code of ethics. They're guided by a profit motive and the naïve belief that their products will magically do good so long as their shareholders do well. They move fast and break things, and now we're seeing the unintended but all-too-predictable consequences.

As librarians we know access to information is important. We need to convey to non-librarians whose information diet is mostly coming from outside the library that access as we mean it is not the same thing as getting supposedly free stuff that has been algorithmically curated for maximum attention stickiness.

While we're at it, let's talk about preservation. What a can of worms. We're experiencing not just an information explosion but practically a big bang when it comes to material culture. How many photos do you have on your phone? Stored somewhere online? How many letters that we once wrote out by hand on paper that might be preserved in an archive are now lost somewhere in a sea of emails? How often have we contributed to an online forum or posted things we created to a platform that vanished without a trace? The internet remembers too much, but it forgets all too often. I recently heard a fascinating presentation by [Jack Gieseke](#) of Trinity

College in Connecticut describing a painstaking quest to recover and map the lesbian-queer history of New York City. He also described a new project – capturing a sense of trans teen cultures, which is playing out on Tumblr. This work of understanding a community and preserving its meaning requires significant reflection: unless you're careful, every photo you takes carries an amazing amount of metadata. It's not helpful as you try to find that one picture among thousands that have the name IMG and a number – IMG one million – but buried in the properties is a lot of information, including where you were you took a picture. Imagine how dangerous some of that could be for transgender teens. So there's that, but my first thought was "oh, great. What will happen to this history when Tumblr folds? It was snapped up by Yahoo in a buying spree before Yahoo began to fall to bits and was bought out by Verizon, which isn't exactly in the business of preserving culture. As more and more of our culture is placed in the hands of for-profit platforms, preserving it is a serious challenge that doesn't figure in those companies' business plans or their non-existent codes of ethics.

Speech: Free as in Kittens

Intellectual freedom is another core value for librarians, though it has a shorter history than access. The [Library Bill of Rights](#) was written in 1938 as a response to the rise of fascism. Nothing like burning books to get our attention – though it needs to be noted that the [ALA didn't pass a statement condemning Nazi book burnings in 1933](#), when it was first proposed. Librarians wanted to stay out of politics and weren't sure censorship was a battle they wanted to own. We also shouldn't forget that anti-fascism wasn't universally embraced by Americans in that era. A pro-Nazi organization filled Madison Square Garden the same year that the ALA finally stood up against fascism and adopted the Library Bill of Rights. Ironically a year after that, Forrest Spaulding, the original author of the Bill of Rights, defended libraries having copies of *Mein Kampf* on their shelves. That kind of decision is still a stumper for us – should we give hate speech our imprimatur? – but in his words, "if more people had read *Mein Kampf*, some of Hitler's despotism might have been prevented."

As an academic librarian, I believe vile books that influenced history are important primary source documents, and it's arguably important to be able to access and preserve contemporary documents we find offensive in order to understand perspectives that seem incomprehensible. What's different in our current information landscape is the ways people discover and share this information. The systems they are using most often are designed to sell

ads. They turn market segmentation into political polarization and push the most upsetting and extreme material to the fore within self-selected groups because it makes us click. Let's talk a little bit about the ways that the word "free" and the concept of "free speech" have become complicated recently. The free software movement developed ways to disambiguate the meanings of the word "free." Free as in beer (zero cost). Free as in speech (liberty). Free as in kittens (responsibility). As it turns out, the "free" tools we use most often to communicate are not free as in beer, and free speech, just like kittens, requires care and feeding.

From its birth, the internet has been celebrated as a haven for free speech but, for many, it's a place where speaking up can unleash the wrath of a troll army with real-life consequences. Playful, anything-goes raunchiness blossomed in the shadowy channels of what had been created as an image-sharing platform for anime and manga fans. 4Chan, the site where Lolcats were born, also spun off offensive attacks on unwitting strangers picked at random as well as political movements. Anonymous adopted left-wing causes; others took a right turn and mobilized against "social justice warriors," game developers or anyone else who dared to challenge white masculine control of internet culture. As trolls and the far right began to collaborate, the very phrase "free speech" was co-opted to unsettle college campuses with well-funded national tours of celebrity provocateurs mocking "political correctness" – and used to justify mobs marching with torches, chanting Nazi slogans in defense of Confederate monuments and white supremacy.

Libraries, which developed intellectual freedom as a core value in response to the rise of fascism and then again during the excesses of McCarthyism, when the Freedom to Read statement was adopted, have plenty of practice threading the needle of promoting freedom of speech while preserving public spaces that are hospitable to all. Remember when some company partnered with the New York City government to provide ad-supported internet kiosks on streets so everyone could have access to the internet? What could possibly go wrong? Maybe they should have talked to the librarians in the city who had already learned that some folks will park themselves for hours to watch porn and do things you don't want to see in public yet have figured out how to negotiate what that access means in practice so all can enjoy it. Likewise, we have figured out ways to provide information that some object to without making entire parts of our populations feel unwanted or threatened. We have both values and "been

there, done that” experience that could help us collaborate with others to develop tools and methods of fostering discourse that doesn’t involve silencing those we disagree with or allowing bullies to claim all the space for themselves.

Privacy Matters

Let’s talk about privacy. Some of us have had a hard time in the past persuading our colleagues that it still exists and that protecting it is really important. That we shouldn’t conduct surveillance on our students to justify our budget next year. That putting Facebook and Twitter buttons on everything is the best way to market ourselves. Seriously, why take the trouble to protect patron privacy and then sprinkle little icons through our website and catalog that send information about who’s looking at what to those corporations? How much information are we giving Google by using their analytics tools? What if people really like our defense of privacy – wouldn’t that be more likely to help our “brand” than trying to cozy up to Google and Facebook? Especially now?

Members of the US Congress were shocked, shocked to learn that Cambridge Analytica (a marketing company that bragged they had the goods on every adult American adult and could manipulate their emotions for political messaging), had exported information about tens of millions of Facebook users to use on behalf of the Trump and Brexit campaigns.

Lawmakers lined up, eager to let Mark Zuckerberg have it. He, in turn, said users had total control over their privacy and blamed Cambridge Analytica for misbehaving. Yet gathering and mining personal data to influence people’s behavior has been



Facebook's business model from day one. (Well, not quite day one; the precursor to Facebook was a juvenile app that scraped Harvard sites to pit unwitting students in a "hot or not" face-off competition.) Data is proverbially the new oil, and Facebook, Google, and less well-known but powerful data brokers are today's monopolistic robber barons. The internet as we know it today pumps a seemingly inexhaustible supply of personal information from all of us which can be manipulated at enormous speed, recombined with other data, and used to do everything from sell us shoes to decide whether we will get a loan, an education, or a prison sentence. And guess who else wants to get into the act? Verizon and AT&T, those friendly giants who want a piece of the adtech action and won the ability to spy on us by the same Congress that decided Mark Zuckerberg needed a good scolding.

Aggregating our data for the purposes of persuasion can be used to swing presidential elections and destabilize democratic institutions. As Zeynep Tufekci has put it, "[we're building a dystopia just to make people click on ads.](#)" With the growth of the Internet of Things, even our homes are being filled with easily-hackable surveillance devices and the streets are policed by officers who rely on private-sector products that can tell them where we go and pick our faces out in a crowd, probable cause of a crime not required.

In the US, this data-gathering is virtually unregulated and information we "voluntarily" provide to a corporation (by clicking through a long, complex, and deliberately confusing terms of service) can be obtained by the state

without a warrant thanks to the third party doctrine. As Edward Snowden revealed, our government gathers massive amounts of data – so much that it has been called a “turnkey totalitarian state.” Facebook helped habituate us. The American public, still reeling from the 9/11 attacks, was outraged when the government announced a “total information awareness” program back in 2003. It was just too much power in too few hands. It was too 1984, too creepy. In response to protests, Congress immediately defunded the program. A year later, Facebook was invented and within a short time privacy seemed irrevocably lost, even though the vast majority of Americans are unhappy about it and wish they could have greater control over who has information about them.

Privacy is a core library value because, without it, you can’t feel free to explore ideas that someone else might consider dangerous. Teens need to be free to read about their sexuality in libraries without being ratted out to their parents. Scholars of radical movements need to be able to trust they won’t be turned in to the authorities for suspicious activity. Librarians have repeatedly stood up for privacy in the face of legal threats. We fight for privacy in our libraries. We should fight for it in the wider information landscape.

The Racist in the Machine

Diversity is a core library value, even though we struggle to honor it in our hiring practices. Yes, it’s problematic that we claim to value diversity but nearly 90 percent of librarians are white. Yes, there is a lot more to do to make our libraries inclusive and to ensure that we’re up front about ways our classification systems and subject headings and collections and programs fall short. But we also need to do what we can to help people understand the ways racism is reproduced in the global information systems we use every day – and in information systems that we may not even realize are operating in the background.

Let’s start with the tool so often used to find information it has become a verb. When Dylann Roof systematically murdered nine black men and women who had welcomed him into their church, he told FBI agents how he became radicalized. He Googled it.

To be sure, he started out with a predisposition to ask questions with white supremacist assumptions in mind, but algorithms enhanced his predisposition. [Reporters for NPR](#) tried to recreate his search. In spite of CSI wizardry, there is actually no way to recreate a search a particular person made in the past. But they used Google to see what kind of results they would get for the search terms he described. Not only did the top results

come from white supremacist propaganda sites, auto-complete decided what they must be looking for – “black on white” must be about “crime”.

That does happen anymore. Not only does the autocomplete function suggests black on white vans, pottery, road signs, or books, the top results have nothing to do with race – or with the fact that Dylann Roof found strikingly different results. They were promoted algorithmically and, when they became a liability, they were edited out.

People make decisions that influence how algorithms work, and their often implicit assumptions push bigotry to the top of search results, show black girls pornographic images of themselves, and run ads that redline opportunity. Not only do algorithms favor sensationalism, an entire industry has sprung up to help website owners game the system because people pay the most attention to the first results. This “architecture of persuasion” designed to capture our attention not only reproduces racism, it amplifies its reach and compounds the problem. It happens over and over: A black researcher notices that when she searches for people whose names sound African American, she’s shown ads for criminal background checks. A program for automatically generating images tags labels black people as “gorillas.” The apologies and quick fixes come later.

Even more troubling are the algorithmic results we don’t even see in action generated by proprietary systems being used to choose who gets a loan, an education, a job, or a long prison sentence. These systems “learn” racism from the past and are using historical data to encode and reproduce racist practice into their decisions. And we can’t even see it happening. It’s almost always a trade secret.

Librarians have not always lived up to their values when it comes to diversity, but we can raise the question: “how can we make a case for ensuring information systems don’t perpetuate racism?” – and if that seems too tall an order, at least “how can we let people know what’s going on?”

Practicing Freedom in the People’s University

An informed populace is a prerequisite for democracy. That’s a bedrock belief that goes way back, just as fundamental a library value as access. It’s why we work in educational institutions. We are committed to helping our faculty push the boundaries of knowledge and helping our students learn, not just for the test next week but for a lifetime of curiosity and informed decision-making. We hope experiences students have in our libraries prepares them to be lifelong learners, able to participate as free human beings in a democracy.

The internet seems a powerful tool for being informed. Breaking news streams right into our hands as we glance at our phones. We can get answers to questions by simply asking them aloud in a home equipped with a digital assistant. We can find a video explaining how to fix our broken faucet on YouTube or settle a dispute in seconds with a Google search. It's all there, just waiting for us to ask. We don't have to rely on experts. *We can do the research ourselves!* But as we've learned in recent years, the so-called information age has become an era of disinformation, clickbait, and lies that circle the globe before the truth can get its pants on. Moreover, a public commitment to education isn't what it used to be. Our K12 systems are no longer public in the sense of being a common experience funded by sharing the cost. Schools have to compete against one another in the name of consumer choice. Higher education has become an expensive personal investment rather than a public good, accused of being elitist even though [nearly 40 percent](#) of undergraduates attend a community college and [over a third](#) of all college students are so broke they sometimes don't have enough to eat.

Libraries have the potential to use their values to advocate for reform across the information industries. The entwined values of democracy and life-long learning embodied in libraries – and the high level of trust in librarians as guides to good information sources – suggests tech has something to learn from us. The enormous value tech companies have created in making it possible to share knowledge and learn from one another is too important to waste on platitudes and advertising schemes.

Creating Common(s) Sense

A while back, I talked my colleagues into using a small piece of our library budget to support an open access project, [Open Library of Humanities](#). Based in the UK, it's a really well-thought-out platform for publishing new humanities research and flipping subscription publications to an open access model. Unlike the sciences, there isn't much grant money going to humanities to fund publishing costs, so this model relies on member libraries kicking in a small annual amount. But we've grown so used to the idea that capitalism is the only way things can work, a consortium of libraries in the state of Georgia had to [withdraw its support](#) for open access projects because its legislature won't allow tax dollars to support projects that benefit folks who don't live in Georgia. This is not how institutions that advance learning are supposed to work.

Thanks to [an influential article](#) published by Garrett Hardin in *Science* in

1968, the adjective most commonly associated with the word “commons” is “tragic.” Isn’t it sad that we can’t get along, that selfishness inherent in human nature makes it impossible to share resources fairly and sustainably? Such a shame that whatever we try to do together is bound to be ruined by self-interest. This is a misconception promoted by financial interests since the 1970s to redirect public funding from providing for the common good to supporting private enterprise, which would supposedly trickle benefits down (an economic theory proven wrong decades ago). This is the underlying set of assumptions that has created an unprecedented wealth gap, shredded the safety net, and turned us against one another. It’s a philosophical stance so embedded in the technologies we use every day that the verb “share” has changed its meaning. It’s no longer about people allocating goods fairly amongst themselves, it’s a business model built on promoting attention-grabbing self-branding. You’re encouraged to constantly donate personal information, time, and relationships so your rich, interconnected data trail can be used to target advertising. And the monopolies that control that data aren’t quite sure how to fix the monster they created.

Let’s talk about solutions. The challenges we face are huge, and fixes won’t be easy. But there are some approaches that have been suggested:

- **Regulate:** the EU has launched a new privacy standard that could have an influence. If we had the political will to follow suit, we could reset expectations. The FTC has some clout, and the fact that Facebook has been caught out violating a 2011 consent decree suggests there are tools available to balance corporate interests with the public interest if the fines are large enough and enforcement is a priority. Tim Wu has suggested that if Congress won’t act, states could pass laws that require data-gathering companies to be information fiduciaries, required to serve the interests of their users, not just of their shareholders. Anti-trust action is another tool that needs to be applied – Facebook, Google, and Amazon have been allowed to acquire too many competitors and vertically integrate in ways that give them too much power. The last time we had extreme inequality and too much power and money in a few hands – during the first Gilded Age – we busted the trusts. We can do it again.
- **Legislate:** We have weak privacy laws in this country, but there’s nothing to stop us fixing that situation – though it may require first reforming campaign finance laws. Which we should do anyway.

- **Create:** While it will be challenging to come up with financial models and woo talent away from the likes of Google and Facebook, there are people working on new platforms that enable connecting and sharing that don't use massive surveillance as a business model. Safiya Noble has suggested replacing Google with a public option. I think that's a stretch, but we certainly can support developing new options and using those that are already out there.
- **Protect:** We need to change our national security position from offensive to defensive. This is more of a security issue than a privacy issue, but they overlap. Currently our government, like many, wants to find vulnerabilities in connected technologies – not to fix them, but to exploit them for conducting foreign surveillance. That leaves us all vulnerable. We should prioritize safety over surveillance capability. Likewise, we should insist that systems we use to automate public services and pay for with tax dollars be auditable and accountable.
- **Include.** There are too many places, from start-up funding to writing code, where women and people of color are shut out. It's time to demand better conditions for women and people of color in the tech industries.
- **Deliberate:** Encourage and model effective public discourse from the grassroots level on up. That's something libraries and higher ed institutions are actually pretty good at. Between sponsoring research into how platforms work, how communities online can be shaped to favor discourse over division, and holding local discussions that bridge divides, we have contributions to make.

All of those are tall orders. What can we as librarians actually do about it? It's not like we're sitting around bored, twiddling out thumbs. How is this supposed to fit in with all the other work we don't have enough time to do? My suggestion is try to see the entire information landscape as we think about our roles. In particular . . .

- **Learn:** we're information professionals. We have to keep up with what's happening in the wider information landscape. If not us, who will? Is there anyone else on campus who owns this role – maybe your IT folks? Ours have to stay on top of security issues. They're thinking about how to protect the campus. We're thinking about how to help students be information literate and leave college ready to engage with the world.

To do that, we have to be informed about the technology channels through which so much of our information flows and is shaped.

- **Teach:** this is a role librarians have already embraced, especially in academic libraries. We're in classrooms, we're talking to faculty, we're helping students with projects. Let's include in our educational mandate preparing students for lifelong learning and social responsibility by talking about the information systems they use and will continue to use. You're probably asking yourselves, "Yeah, right, we're going to fit this into a 50-minute one-shot?" Most of what our students need to learn doesn't fit into fifty minutes. We may have to do it through other means: programming, faculty partnerships, guest lectures, documentation. What if in addition topic selection or evaluating sources or whatever is on our instruction menu we added things like dealing with misinformation or understanding online persuasion or surveillance self-defense? I think faculty would welcome us stepping up to address these issues, because it's not in their toolkit.
- **Engage:** Library values have been developed over decades of thinking about information and its role in society. Maybe our users only think about what we do in terms of access, with a side of customer service thrown in. We need to get the word out that we have a comprehensive and interlocking set of values that Silicon Valley culture, moving faster than the speed of ethics, hasn't had the time or will to develop. So many of the unanticipated outcomes we're struggling with today could have been avoided. The fact that libraries exist – that we're allowed to share information for the common good while respecting privacy and intellectual freedom – that's a good sign.

There are concrete actions we can take – some immediately, some long-term – to rebuild a sense of the commons. If we reject the idea that self-interest is the primary driver of human behavior and that moneyed interests should have the power to make decisions for us, we can think creatively about retooling technology systems to support individual expression, personal growth, healthy communities, social justice, and the greater good. Another world is both possible and necessary. The fact that we still have libraries in spite of everything proves we already have an ethical scaffold for rebuilding a social infrastructure that is more just, equitable, and sustainable.

Recommended Reading

Greenfield, Adam. *Radical Technologies: The Design of Everyday Life*. Verso, 2018.

Marwick, Alice Emily. *Status Update: Celebrity, Publicity, and Branding in the Social Media Age*. Yale, 2013.

Noble, Safiya. *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*. NYU, 2018.

O'Neil, Cathy. *Weapons of Math Destruction: How Big Data Increases Inequality and Threatens Democracy*. Crown, 2016.

Phillips, Whitney. *This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things: Mapping the Relationship between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture*. MIT Press, 2016.

Tufekci, Zeynep. *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest*. Yale, 2017.

Vaidhyanathan, Siva. *Antisocial Media: How Facebook Disconnects Us and Undermines Democracy*. Oxford, 2018.

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TECHNOLOGY AND SOCIETY

Negotiating a New Social Contract for Digital Data

July 30, 2015

Tracy Mitrano asks “[Is the 4th Amendment dead in cyberspace?](#)” She thinks the distinction between metadata and the content it is attached to can no longer be treated separately by U.S. law. I concur, and agree with her that FISA, a court created after the COINTELPRO hearings to give intelligence services some judicial oversight, needs to be thoroughly reformed if not abolished. Secret opinions made using secret legal rationales in a secret courtroom is not judicial oversight as I understand it.

But my concerns don't stop there. the Bill of Rights primarily speaks to limiting the power of the state. We also need to think about regulating uses of our data by non-state actors. The capacity to generate, collect, and mine data has grown quickly, well beyond our capacity to negotiate a new social contract to govern these new realities. Arriving at a new social contract is complicated for a number of reasons, including

- the internet is international. Our concepts of where privacy belongs in the law are culturally situated, highly political, and have geographic boundaries. As an example, [Google has just told a French regulatory authority](#) that it will not apply the E.U. rule governing the “right to be forgotten” on its U.S. site. Google argues that if they have to apply local laws globally, they'll have to remove massive numbers of links to content that offends one government or another. I see their point, but in an interconnected world, it makes things messy.
- the internet is porous. Security is extremely difficult to maintain, and the more data flows across the internet, the more opportunities there are to intercept it. This situation isn't helped by the deliberate actions taken by states (including our own government) to undermine security in order to exploit backdoors and vulnerabilities.
- data is not neutral. How we gather and use data depends on human beings. Likewise, [algorithms are not sui generis](#). They are created by people with agendas, biases, and blind spots. Further, the effect big

data has on individuals and communities is also not evenly distributed.

- the ways data is collected and used is very often [a trade secret in a black box](#) and changes without our knowledge or consent.
- the companies that gather data don't always have tight control over what happens to it. They may go out of business and have the data they collected sold as an asset to pay creditors. They may be hacked. They may have rogue API users who don't abide by the terms of service, as the consumer genetic service 23andme [learned recently](#) when a coder, using its data, created a program to screen people seeking to use a web service for specific qualities, such as being of "pure" enough European ancestry.
- When anonymized data from multiple sources is combined, it stops being anonymous. Earlier this year, [researchers found](#) that they could identify individuals with as little as four pieces of anonymized shopping information 90 percent of the time.
- data that is inaccurate can be hard to correct and those errors have consequences.

There is a lot of good stuff that can come from using large data sets, but we need to figure out who gets to decide which uses are beneficial.

Human geographer Rob Kitchen of Maynooth University recently wrote [a thought-provoking article](#) about data and how "smart cities" could use it. It's heady stuff, but he acknowledges the work that needs to be done on the social contract side. I think it is a caveat that applies to all uses of big data.

[T]he transformations taking place are fast-paced and often too little debated or contested in the mainstream media and legislature, with disruptive technical and social innovations taking root and expanding rapidly before we have time to digest the implications or consider the need for oversight. Such thinking though is needed if we are to reap the benefits of big data and smart cities, rather than the negative consequences. How to gain the former and avoid the latter has to be worth pondering every time we interact with a digital device or traverse a city leaving a trail of data in our wake. The alternative is that smart cities are created that represent the interests of a select group of corporations, technocrats, and certain groups within society (particularly political elites and the wealthy), rather than producing ones that are in the best interests of all citizens.

How are we going to make those decisions? Here are some suggestions from [Bruce Schneier](#):

- less secrecy, more transparency, and better oversight of government uses of data.
- regulate data collection and use by corporations and give people rights to their own data.
- [educate ourselves](#), advocate for change, and don't give up.

Admittedly, these fixes won't be easy, but here's a lot at stake.

The Bigot in the Machine

March 17, 2016

Over the years, I've made a point of helping students see the ways in which library systems make biased decisions when it comes to organizing information. The Library of Congress classification system treats women as a category subordinate to families. The debate over whether to change the Library of Congress subject heading "Illegal aliens" to "undocumented immigrants" is a recent illustration of struggles to make subject headings fit contemporary usage and avoid offensive terminology that has gone on for longer than I've been a librarian. Students are quick to pick up on this issue. The trick is to know that these failures exist so that you can work around them.

Recently, I've had a harder time convincing students that algorithms can be [similarly screwy](#). As one student put it, algorithms are sets of instructions being executed by a machine, and once constructed aren't touched by human hands. So all the biases one might find in, say, Google search results are merely reflective of larger society. You can't blame the search engine if it places [ads for criminal background checks](#) next to the names of black people; blame the people who clicked on those ads and trained the machine to assume that people searching for information about black folks must be interested in their criminal history. You can't fault Google if [men are shown ads for higher-paying jobs than women are](#). That's the breaks! It's just too bad that [young black girls](#) are likely to have to wade through pornography to find websites about their lives.

(Incidentally, Matt Reidsma recently published [an important analysis](#) of how library discovery systems have similar problems, often returning bizarrely wrong results. It's a must-read for librarians.)

Bias is not just in search, of course. The information we generate across platforms is used behind the scenes and by third parties. Companies can use location or other personal data to tweak their prices – for example, charging more for products when there is no nearby competition, which tends to disadvantage the already disadvantaged. [Students](#) discovered that the Princeton Review charges different prices for their online tutoring program depending on broad regional categories, with the odd effect that

[Asians were being charged significantly more](#) than whites even when their income was modest. Police are using social media combined with other data sources to identify people who the machine says are [criminally inclined](#). A Whitehouse report cautioned that data might be used in ways that result in [digital redlining](#). Big data can magnify big social problems.

One of the problems with recognizing algorithmic bias is that, while we can look at the [Library of Congress classification scheme](#) and search their [authority file](#) to see whether a subject heading is used or not (and if not, what alternatives there are), we can't see how an algorithm is engineered. These are black boxes, unavailable for examination, because they are valuable trade secrets, and each of us sees something different when we search, making it hard to generalize. Besides, if the various levers and pulleys within an algorithm are known, people will try to game it. Google has to constantly tweak their search algorithm to thwart companies that are paid to push search results higher. This makes it harder to predict and work around problems.

All that said, algorithmic bias is [not inevitable and bias is not unsurmountable](#). Algorithms are made by humans, making human decisions. With effort, [humans can work toward](#) systems that are less biased. In the meantime it's good to be aware that algorithms aren't entirely even-handed and dispassionate sorters of information, any more than library organizational schemes are.

What's Love Got to Do With It?

April 17, 2016

Want to buy a classic piece of internet history? A dorky-looking link-heavy platform that will remind some of us of our youth, spending hours on Netscape thinking “wow, this is way cooler than Gopher.” Yahoo goes on sale today. Though it’s an antique, you probably can’t afford it.

Or maybe you’re too young to have fond memories of clunky internet directories. Chances are, Yahoo is simply an annoying piece of malware that rides in when some sadistic site requires you to download Java and you’re in a rush and you fail to uncheck a tiny box and suddenly your browser keeps going to Yahoo and you tear your hair out trying to make it go away. You might want to buy Yahoo so you can smash it to bits with a hammer.

I happen to use Yahoo daily. No, I didn’t get stuck with that annoying malware (at least, not lately), but for years I’ve belonged to [a book discussion group](#) that has been running on [Yahoo Groups](#) since 1999. Mostly, I get posts routed to me by email, but the platform had quite a strong set of functions for creating databases, storing files, sharing photo albums, sending out polls, and giving moderators tools to keep a community humming – until a disastrous upgrade in 2013. It looked old-school and had its glitches, but it was far more functional than Google Groups, didn’t require hosting like the venerable and still functional listserv software, and wasn’t as dead as USENET. It reportedly had 115 million users in 2010; no word on how many gave up in despair when Yahoo decided to make it look more like Facebook. (Note to tech companies: never, ever try to be more like Facebook. Facebook has cornered the market on being like Facebook. You’ll never catch up, and you’ll lose whatever you do that’s worthwhile in the process.)

But I’m not just using their geriatric bulletin-board-like Groups, I frequently use [Flickr](#) to find creative commons-licensed or public domain images and I’ve posted some of my own there (though not many since they decided to redesign it and the load time became glacial). I use [Tumblr](#) to keep a [stash of articles on privacy](#), even though I’ve never totally understood how the social side of Tumblr works. Yahoo bought Flickr a decade ago and spent over a billion to acquire Tumblr, which is now worth \$230 million less. That kind of business acumen is a tradition with Yahoo. In 1998, the company turned down the chance to buy a new search engine from two Stanford

Students named Larry Page and Sergei Brin, and in 2006 reportedly came [close to buying Facebook](#) but got cold feet during the bidding. Whatever happens with this sale, the CEO will walk away either millions or tens of millions. Buying and selling stuff on a giant scale is where the money is, these days. Doing it badly doesn't seem to matter.

There's something unsettling about having so much of the content I care about generated by millions of people who do it because they want to share stuff dependent on platforms that are worth billions, but never enough to keep shareholders satisfied – or worth so much the company doesn't know what to do with all cash except buy up other platforms and the talent they rode in on. It's the same discomfort I feel when I think about the fact that five corporations control the publishing of half of science research journals and three-quarters of social science journals. Coming up with sustainable ways to build and run platforms big enough to not fail is really hard. If you succeed and create a valuable platform, someone with deep pockets may buy it and rip its soul out.

Clay Shirky famously argued in *Here Comes Everybody* that we used to live in a world where little things were done out of love but big things could only be done for money. Thanks to the internet, he believed, we could now do big things for love. Lovely thought. But most of the things we do for something other than money are still small things created by a large number of people, donating those small things to platforms that suck in petabytes of love (and personal data), and become in the process so big they are too valuable to do anything but seek more value.

What's love got to do with it? These platforms are too big to fail without losing a big piece of our collective culture. We need to find a better way of sharing what we love.

No News Would Be Bad News

June 28, 2016

There's a new [State of the News Media](#) report out (finally!) and, while I'm used to celebrating its arrival in March, it's always worth waiting for – not because the news is good, it's not. But it's a way of checking up on an industry that matters. I know that trashing the media is all the rage, but I am an incurable romantic when it comes to the value of good reporting and the [values](#) that underlie it.

The recession isn't over for newspapers, my news source of choice. Though newsrooms aren't hemorrhaging jobs quite as drastically as past years, things aren't good. There are 33,000 reporters and editors at work now – 20,000 fewer than there were merely two decades ago. Cable and network news is doing better financially, though (I would argue) not in terms of actual news value. Wall-to-wall hyperactive election coverage for months and months, particularly when one candidate is a professional television personality, brings in advertising and viewers, though it makes me want to finally cut the cord, just as nuisance campaign calls led to us ditching our landline years ago. I'm not alone. The report suggests that cords are being cut more frequently, particularly by young viewers, so television news is soon going to be facing the very challenges that newspapers have been wrestling with for years. How do you pay for news gathering when the way you paid the bills and delivered the goods no longer works? And why, when the industry is so troubled, do we keep seeing so much consolidation? Newspapers must be worth something if speculators keep buying them – or is it just the kind of peculiar speculation that made so many folks rich through bundling and reselling the debt on desperate people's homes?

The Sunday *New York Times* comes to my door the old-fashioned way, with a thump, and the digital version comes to my phone, but it's far from my main news source. A huge percentage of the news stories I read – even those published by the *Times* – come to me through my Twitter connections. (I don't use Facebook, but it's another major site for people's news habits, and so important to news organizations that they have cut deals to publish *inside* Facebook, even though they cede some control and have to share ad revenue.) It's a little mysterious to me why I prefer the folks who I follow to be my news editors, but my habits suggest that I do. It's partly

professional connections – a story that a fellow librarian or academic finds interesting may also fall into my range of interests – but I’ve also chosen certain reporters to follow because they cover beats I care about. Since I follow folks in a number of countries, I get more world coverage than I can get from the *Times* (though, admittedly, my Twitter feed is biased toward English-speaking nations, so Britain, Canada, and Australia loom disproportionately large). An even stronger motivation to read while on Twitter: when I see a story that I think is important, I want to share it. It’s one of the small frustrations that mars the pleasure of lazily reading the Sunday paper: the frequent urge to share a story when tapping the paper doesn’t make it happen.

I also find some non-traditional news sites are reliably worth reading, even though nothing they write arrives at anyone’s doorstep with a thump. [ProPublica](#) (which often collaborates with news organizations that thump, but was born online), [The Intercept](#), even [BuzzFeed](#) and [Vice](#) which have a lot of silly clickbait but also some excellent reporters – does anyone cover tech law better than [Sarah Jeong](#)? And then there’s – ahem – an upstart higher ed [publication](#) that gives the venerable *Chronicle* a run for its money without charging subscriptions or producing a thumping big paper edition.

There’s a real challenge in paying for reporting, especially when you have a past to live up to. Print advertising still pays the bills for many newspapers but the number of print readers is declining, and digital advertising requires sharing smaller profits with [ad auctioneers](#), Facebook, Google, and other intermediaries. Those not-very-profitable online ads are also driving the audience increasingly toward ad blockers to safeguard their privacy and their computer’s security because ads are not only annoying, they gather personal information and sometimes inject dangerous malicious code. We’re increasingly seeing news platforms demand either you disable your ad blocker or pay for access to get around the problem, but it’s not a long-term solution.

There are some parallels with scholarly and scientific publishing. Legacy practices ran on a revenue model that is no longer working, and finding one that works is proving tricky. Readers are getting increasingly used to finding articles online, but prestige still comes attached to publications that at least look as if they were printed. Discovery is harder in a crowded marketplace, which is increasingly crowded because people are publishing more. We’re all terribly reliant on third parties whose business model depends on the misuse of personal data, a model that could implode with serious implications. Both

readers and authors expect the freedom to share – it's a critical part of the discovery process today as well as a means of measuring impact – and that can be made difficult with subscription barriers, required sign-ups, or intrusive ads – especially as increasingly, we're reading articles on our phones. And then there's that puzzling tendency for media consolidation, with a few companies more interested in profitability than product getting bigger and more powerful, though probably not too big to fail.

Is there any good news? Sometimes I wonder if anyone cares. Watching the contempt for factuality that led Boris Johnson to lie in very large letters on a big red bus and then try to [remove](#) the lie from the web once the Brexit referendum went his way, listening to adults suggest that [fact-checking is an elitist practice](#), knowing that the public's favorability [rating](#) for the press is only slightly higher than for our two leading but widely [unpopular](#) presidential candidates, all of them facing historically low levels of trust, not to mention little understanding of the value of academic research and widespread belief that scientific findings have a liberal bias – I wonder if seeking the truth and publishing it matters. But I have to believe it does. We need to figure out new ways to fund it since our publishing opportunities, discovery practices, and reading preferences have changed.

Hey, if [Pew Research](#) can conduct and publish the research that underlies the annual State of the New Media report (and so much more – my Twitter stream and my newspaper often tell me about new research they have released), what can I be but hopeful?

And by the way, speaking of news challenges – [Knight has just funded](#) some interesting ones being worked on in libraries. Check it out.

Data Breaches, Betrayals, and Broken Promises

October 6, 2016

Poor old Yahoo. Three weeks ago, we found out that, oopsie, 500 million of their users [had their data hacked](#), the biggest breach of a single company (that we know of – yet). Yahoo says it was probably the work of a state actor and they only recently realized information stolen in 2014, including passwords, security questions, and personal information like date of birth and addresses, is being sold on the underground info-market. The trouble with this kind of information is that it can be linked with other information that, combined, can cause a lot of havoc. Though Yahoo isn't the major player it once was, it still has a billion monthly users. Verizon, which was all set to buy it, must be renegotiating the terms. I mean, they want all that personal information, but it's worth less if it's not exclusive.

Now, another controversy. On Tuesday Reuters [reported](#) Yahoo's leadership decided to [hack their own users](#) by building a tool to scan all users' communications to comply with a secret government surveillance request which [might have been unconstitutional](#). The story, backed by unnamed sources who provided Reuters with a copy of the secret order, is particularly intriguing because it may have been a way to [get around the encryption](#) that, increasingly, users demand to avoid things like having state actors hack their personal information and sell it online. Encryption is not going to protect us from our own state if the key-holders willingly carry out searches for the state. This was the root of [the conflict between Apple and the Department of Justice](#) that played out last February. Yahoo, of course, says it did nothing wrong, and every other major corporation holding enormous amounts of data about you says they would not do what Yahoo did, whatever it was. But clearly all of that personal data which we are required to surrender for a chance to find stuff out, share stuff, or talk to each other is vulnerable in countless ways.

One of the proposed solutions for the fecklessness of having massive amounts of personal data collected in places that cannot be kept secure without a great deal of trouble is to make companies that collect this data "information fiduciaries." Bruce Schneier mentioned this concept briefly in

his book, *Data and Goliath*. Jack Balkin (who Schneier cites) and Jonathan Zittrain [have just written about this idea in The Atlantic](#).

In the law, a fiduciary is a person or business with an obligation to act in a trustworthy manner in the interest of another. Examples are professionals and managers who handle our money or our estates. An information fiduciary is a person or business that deals not in money but in information. . . . the important question is whether these businesses, like older fiduciaries, have legal obligations to be trustworthy. The answer is that they should.

To deal with the new problems that digital businesses create, we need to adapt old legal ideas to create a new kind of law—one that clearly states the kinds of duties that online firms owe their end users and customers. The most basic obligation is a duty to look out for the interests of the people whose data businesses regularly harvest and profit from.

Certainly, one could argue that Yahoo failed to act in a trustworthy manner by allowing state actors (including our own) to gain access to information that we entrusted to the company.

There's another kind of trust that these giant information companies frequently breach: we voluntarily give them content, which they fail to preserve or protect when they lose interest, drop a product line, or get acquired by another owner. True, they never said they would take care of our stuff in that incredibly long and dense TOS that we agreed to. But our culture is happening in these digital spaces, and the owners of these spaces have no commitment to it.

Yahoo owns the rights to a conversation about books that I've been part of that started in 1999 and is still going. Thousands of people have played a part in that Yahoo Groups conversation over the years, and there are thousands of groups like it. Other people have built lovingly-curated albums of photographs on Flickr, which Yahoo bought and is trying to sell. Others have built beautiful Tumblrs that Yahoo is also trying to unload. That's a lot of culture in the hands of people who don't care. I have no doubt those conversations and albums and weirdly beautiful collections of connected and commented-on stuff will be lost because the host company doesn't care about the stuff; they only care about tracking your personal data to sell targeted advertising, the great Tulip Craze or South Sea Bubble of our era.

If you read nothing else today, let me introduce you to [Deep-Fried Data](#), a talk given at the Library of Congress by Maciej Cegłowski, who may be my all-time favorite talker, even though I've never heard him speak. He talked about how what we entrust to corporations like Yahoo isn't just data, it's the history and the heart of communities, something hackers may not want, but which we shouldn't lose through carelessness. "A URL is a promise," he writes. And too many of them are broken.

Our new Librarian of Congress will be thinking about how to preserve our digital culture, a tall order when the companies that hold it let our personal information get hacked and ransacked but have no commitment to the communities that thrive on their platforms or to the cultural artifacts they create there. Cegłowski reminded me today that when these companies lose track of our information, they not only lose our trust and our personally identifying information, they lose our conversations, our family albums, our attics, our hope chests.

All the "News" That's Fit to Click

November 16, 2016

I'm worried about the news. Not what's *in* the news, though that's troubling enough. No, I'm wondering what will happen to the news for a number of reasons.

First, the president-elect is unusually hostile to the press. He has [banned reporters](#) from major news outlets from covering election events and from [his first meeting at the white house](#), he's incited anger and even violence against members of the press during events (in my own state, a man responded by wearing a T-shirt to a Trump event [promoting the lynching of journalists](#)), and he has sued newspapers for doing their job. Even when lawsuits are groundless, they are costly to defend, something Trump [knows from experience](#). Given his appointment of Breitbart's Steve Bannon as his chief strategist, he's [weaponizing](#) his contempt for the press by elevating to a position of influence the executive chairman of a sneering, for-the-lulz, insult-saturated white nationalist website that bears as much resemblance to news as the *National Enquirer* does. No wonder "post-truth" has been [declared the word of the year](#) by Oxford Dictionaries.

Second, money is a problem for news organizations. Not only do news outlets lack cash to spare on [SLAPP suits](#), they don't even have enough for newsgathering. We've [lost nearly 40 percent](#) our working journalists from newsrooms since 1996 and there's word of [more cuts to come](#) now that the election furor is dying down and miserable earnings reports arrive. Consolidation continues apace, but it's not doing anything good for news.

Finally – and this is especially troubling – as ad revenue has gone digital, with our attention and personal information being auctioned off to third parties by the millisecond, and as massive internet platforms become the window through which we watch the world stream by, news organizations have had to concede that they are no longer our news source. Oh, we do read their stories, but the clicks go through Google and Facebook, the two giant anchor stores of the commercialized Internet, to borrow Maciej Cegłowski's [evocative image](#).

Newspapers have always depended at least in part on advertising, but they are first news organizations. Google and Facebook are ad companies first,

and they are far, far bigger than any advertising operation ever invented. They have perfected the art of capturing our attention through sheer audience size (the [network effect](#)) and by shaping what we see so that we see more of what (presumably) we want to see or what will engage us through adrenaline-spiking outrage, and so will click and share more and more. *Kaching.*

This election has dramatized the problem this causes. We not only miss information that might challenge our prejudices or inform us about the attitudes of people we don't routinely socialize with, we have a harder time knowing whether news is true, because we're counting on personal connections and black-box algorithms to be our news editors. When [Facebook was criticized](#) for suppressing conservative sites like Breitbart and the Drudge Report from its so-called news feed, it decided to [let friends, family, and algorithms](#) take over – which [didn't exactly work out](#). Then we learned that fake news was so popular, creating it became [a business model](#) for East European entrepreneurs, trading on a mix of distrust of institutions, gullibility, and contagious anger. Facebook and Google have announced measures to make creating fake news [less profitable](#), but the fact remains, [polarization is a feature rather than a bug](#) when it comes to our present-day news environment. I'm not sure what to do, apart from subscribing to news sources that I value and doing what I can to include discussions of how to critically approach news sources in my classroom instruction.

Mark Zuckerberg [reportedly said](#) several years ago that a squirrel dying in your front yard may be more relevant to you than people dying in Africa – and by relevance he meant “good for business.” What he didn't know then was that a squirrel being murdered in your front yard by a sinister cabal of animal-sacrificing enemies of all that your friends and family hold dear in a secretive conspiracy to rule the world was even better for business. The hell with those irrelevant Africans. *Click, click, click.*

The Ghost in the Machines of Loving Grace

January 16, 2017

Facebook and Google are highly influential in the way they shape our perceptions of the world, yet have tried hard to deny any responsibility for deciding what is correct or true. That's understandable. Who wants to wade into that territory when really all you want to do is sell highly-targeted advertising? But that targeting, that enormously effective engineering of our attention and our identities, has had a huge effect on what news we see, and it has worked so well that Americans more than ever before live in different worlds, rich in information but without common ground. It's not just a social media problem, of course; [danah boyd points out](#) how our decisions about privatization and personalization have profound influence on our sense of who we are as a nation. But now that we get our news online, and our online lives are so thoroughly shaped by the engineers at Facebook and Google, it's getting harder for these companies to sustain their claim that we're [watched over by machines of loving grace](#) that have not a biased circuit in their bodies.

It struck me yesterday that the problem of algorithmic neutrality is similar to the problem of librarian neutrality. Someone asked me why libraries don't remove books that have had their license revoked, so to speak. The book in question was *Arming America*, which was stripped of its Bancroft Prize when historians called the author's methods and sources into question, but there are plenty of other examples of books that have been debated, denounced, or discredited yet stay on library shelves. I told him academic libraries rarely remove a book because it has fallen into disfavor. Often, a discredited source has had a big impact, and becomes part of the history of that issue. Newer works on the topic will be shelved nearby that will problematize the questionable work and put it in context. We never claim to have the answer; we provide access to multiple answers, but the researcher is the one who has to decide what to think. We expect students to look at a variety of sources and never to take any one source as gospel.

There's a level of trust there, that our students can and will approach a debate with genuine curiosity and integrity. There's also a level of healthy

distrust. We don't believe it's wise to leave decisions about truth and falsehood up to librarians.

But at the same time, we kind of do. We don't want completely false conspiracy theories or propaganda to share equal shelf space (or budget lines) with carefully researched scholarship. We don't want to imply any old "facts" will do in an argument. We don't want to say "nope, we have absolutely no responsibility for what you find here. You want to put some propaganda on our shelves? Go ahead. The more, the merrier." Libraries have collection development policies that spell out the way they approach their choices, and there are always things we don't add as well as things we remove through the same curation process in reverse. There's only so much space and money and not everything furthers the mission of the institution. Besides, if you believe books and the ideas they contain can be beneficial, you have to think through how they can also be harmful, and own that problem.

The thing is, Facebook literally can't afford to be an arbiter. It profits from falsehoods and hype. Social media feeds on clicks, and scandalous, controversial, emotionally-charged, and polarizing information is good for clicks. Things that are short are more valuable than things that are long. Things that reinforce a person's world view are worth more than those that don't fit so neatly and might be passed over. Too much cruft will hurt the brand, but too little isn't good, either. The more we segment ourselves into distinct groups through our clicks, the easier it is to sell advertising. And that's what it's about.

A public sphere can't thrive within a space that's a private enterprise, one that treats information and attention as a commodity to be traded as fast and as often as possible. Facebook and Google may have global reach and may increasingly be where we get our news, but they aren't in the public interest.

If libraries were as personalized, you would wave your library card at the door and enter a different library than the next person who arrives. We'd quickly tidy away the books you haven't shown interest in before; we'd do everything we could to provide material that confirms what you already believe. That doesn't seem a good way to learn or grow. It seems dishonest. Whatever libraries may have in common with these tech companies, however much our stated missions sound similar, they have a difference of purpose, and it's a difference that matters in ways that can be hard to see.

Putting the Person Back in Personalization

March 20, 2017

As I read the paper (on paper!) on Sunday, I learned *The New York Times* has plans to make their online site [more personalized](#). Their current public editor, Liz Spayd, urges the Gray Lady to think about how to avoid creating mini-filter bubbles and suggests that readers be allowed to give feedback – something like a thumbs up or down button – to be “an active part of the process.”

Here’s the thing I realized as I folded back the broadsheet and read that article: I already personalize my reading of the paper. I’m in complete control of whether I read this story or that, whether I put the Travel and Style sections aside while I pore over the national and international news and reach for the Review and page through the business section quickly to see if there’s anything of interest. What makes people think news isn’t already personalized? It always has been. By us, the readers.

Sure, the editor decides which stories appear on A1 above the fold, but that doesn’t mean I have to read what’s in that prime spot (though [this past Sunday](#) it was well worth it). When I’m reading on my phone, I can decide which sections to browse and which stories to read all the way through, which to skim or skip. I don’t want someone presuming they can do it better than I can, especially if it requires following me around and reading over my shoulder, taking notes on my reading habits.

Of course, the choices I make are captive to a news editor’s judgment. Somebody has to decide where to put journalistic resources and decide when a story isn’t sufficiently sourced to run or whether there are gaps in coverage that need filling. While newspapers are still printed on paper, choosing what goes where and how many column inches it gets is a judgment call that I don’t get to make. Okay, understood. But please, don’t presume to make the decisions for me about what I should read based on my location and what I’ve read in the past. It’s not only creepy, it’s curtailing my freedom to read what I want, how I want, when I want. I want my own freedom of the press.

The more our information worlds are sculpted for us by algorithms we

can't inspect or control, the more our future is a narrowing of focus determined by what we've seen before, the less freedom we have to explore ideas. Exploration will always be shaped by human intervention – people adding metadata to records, for example, or making sure titles and abstracts convey key information, or deciding where to put a book on a library shelf using outdated categories created decades ago. Some of it will be shaped by the platform or by past practice. But I would consider it problematic if I couldn't find a piece of research because someone else decided it wouldn't interest me and removed it from my search results. It would bother me if two scholars searching the same database in exactly the same way found different results based on assumptions they didn't make themselves. I know Google does this, but it's an advertising business; search is just the lure. News organizations and research databases don't have to follow its irritating lead.

Back in 1945 when Vannevar Bush [imagined](#) a machine for the management of information, he envisioned people creating “trails of association” among texts, like instant footnotes or hyperlinks created by the reader. These paths, he thought, could be shared and there could be “professional trail blazers” whose work was creating paths for others to follow. His vision was based on mechanizing much of the work of research, making indexing better, making access faster and more ubiquitous. Using a lot of microfilm to make it more compact. Yet “the creative aspect of thinking” still involved people making connections, not machines.

No doubt, and possibly very soon, artificial intelligence will be smart enough to do this kind of work well, but until the algorithms are a lot smarter than they are now, I don't want some other person hiding things from me in the name of personalization. I'd rather make my own choices.

What Kind of Free Is Speech Online?

March 30, 2017

A Pew Research has just published a fascinating in-depth report titled [“The Future of Free Speech Online.”](#) (The PDF version of the study is 75 pages – there’s a lot to it.) Lee Rainie, Janna Anderson, and Jonathan Albright surveyed a number of tech experts to get their predictions about where online discourse is headed. And while nearly 20 percent of the experts are optimistic, most of them think the climate for online discourse will either stay the same or get worse.

The framing of study seems . . . odd, though. The implication is that we can either design online platforms that control behavior (by doing things like prohibiting anonymity, developing reputation systems, or using artificial intelligence to moderate contributions) or we can have freedom. This is where some of internet culture seems to intersect with libertarianism: any attempt to shape the overall tenor of a group conversation is a restriction on individuals’ right of free expression. Or to put it differently, the power to shape the tone of a social interaction is liable to be misused by the powerful.

Part of the issue is that the platforms that have the greatest reach (Facebook, Google, Twitter) are all operating within an economic framework that rewards us for clicking and sharing. Those clicks and shares build up their capacity to place advertisements that are targeted to our interests, or so goes the theory – the more detailed the profile of every individual consumer, the more likely we’ll buy stuff as a result of digitally-placed advertising.

I’ve been waiting for that bubble to burst, and there are signs it may be imminent. A [“sleeping giant”](#) campaign to shame companies that inadvertently advertise on Breitbart has been [fairly successful](#) in highlighting the problems that arise from handing ad companies a wad of cash to auction space on random websites; it doesn’t do the brand any good if its ads show up in places that might offend a portion of their audience. More recently, Google has [been pressed](#) to prevent the ads they place on Youtube from turning up next to terrorist recruitment videos or whackadoodle conspiracy films. Advertisers suddenly want some control over ad buys, and this

threatens the click-click-click economy that has grown up like an invasive species taking over the internet.

But it's not just that these ads appearing on unappealing sites are bad for the brand. *The New York Times* [just reported](#) that Chase pulled back from advertising on 400,000 sites a month to just 5,000 and got the same results. This seems to suggest that the way Google and Facebook make money *doesn't actually work*.

What does this mean? So much of our online experience has been shaped, or rather deformed, around the idea that advertising is the lifeblood of modern-day communications. It has led traditional news organizations to resort to more clickbait and less fact-checking. It has given people incentives to invent exciting but completely made-up “news” stories. It has encouraged mass corporate surveillance without actually showing evidence that it works – and along the way has created vast pools of personal data that can be exploited by hackers, state actors, and people like hedge-fund billionaire [Robert Mercer](#) who are in a position to buy political influence. (Among other political investments, Mercer has invested in Cambridge Analytica, which purports to combine personal data with psychological profiling to create [scarily effective political campaign messaging](#). It's unclear whether their exuberant claims for effectiveness are [supported by evidence](#) or are just marketing hoohah.)

Building a community that can develop and sustain the kind of social norms that define a civil community space takes a great deal of sustained effort, and that effort can't be all top-down and (at this point, at least) can't be purely algorithmic. James Grimmelman's [fascinating study](#) of online community moderation concludes “No community is ever perfectly open or perfectly closed; moderation always takes places somewhere in between.” And it must always take place, even if it's invisible and [outsourced](#) across the planet.

Several experts who participated in the Pew study thought anonymity was the root of trouble online, but sometimes there are [valid reasons](#) why someone wants to be anonymous or pseudonymous online, not just a desire to hit people and run away. The chief reason Facebook and Google want a “real names” policy isn't to curb misbehavior, it's to make it easier to build detailed profiles to sell more advertising. Recent experience suggests provocateurs can make trolling into a profitable business or political campaign, real names and all.

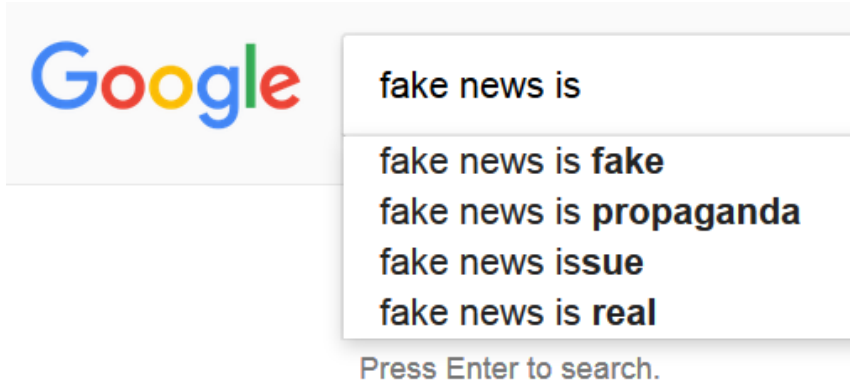
In the end I don't see this as a free speech versus control issue so much

as it's a flaw in the economic model that underwrites the companies that dominate our interactions online, an economic model that incentivizes bad behavior while trashing our privacy. But this is not *the* internet; it's just the ad-supported one we've grown used to in recent years (one the Republicans in Congress just invited internet service providers to join). If the personalized ad bubble bursts, and I think it will, we may have to think hard about how online speech can be free – including free as in beer (provided without a monetary cost) or as in kittens (requiring ongoing care). As one of the Pew experts (Stephen Downes) points out, there are plenty of positive interactions happening online and good information shared. Generating revenue or gaining political power aren't the only motivators for social interaction; maybe what we need is platforms that don't start with that assumption – or a way to support those that start with a different end in mind.

In any case, read the Pew report – it's thought-provoking and timely.

Post-Post Truth

April 13, 2017



In the wake of the election, the social media platforms that play such an influential role in our news consumption admitted they have some responsibility for propagating falsehoods and are examining ways to provide greater accountability.

Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook initially [denied](#) any responsibility for the accelerated sharing of nonsense and propaganda among like-minded groups, but then [reversed course](#) and eventually [published](#) what almost reads like a campaign document: a commitment to building infrastructure for groups that are supportive, safe, informed, civically-engaged, and inclusive. Not only should Facebook connect people, it should encourage certain kinds of social behavior. The platform has a platform after all.

Google, which has run into problems with its [“featured snippets”](#) providing answers through its Google Home gadget that are complete fabrications and [angering advertisers](#) by placing ads in the company of offensive videos, has [rolled out a feature](#) to tag dubious stories with reports from third-party fact-checking organizations and is [fiddling with the way](#) people who upload videos to YouTube are rewarded with ad dollars to placate advertisers.

But while the technologies that were designed to capture attention and engage users for the sake of advertising have made it easier for fake news (however that’s defined) to spread, with their architectures encouraging the rise of polarized news environments, technical fixes won’t solve the problem of polarization and distrust. As [danah boyd puts it](#),

Too many people seem to think that you can build a robust program to cleanly define who and what is problematic, implement it, and then presto—problem solved. Yet anyone who has combatted hate and intolerance knows that Band-Aid solutions don't work. They may make things invisible for a while, but hate will continue to breed unless you address the issues at the source. We need everyone—including companies—to be focused on grappling with the underlying dynamics that are mirrored and magnified by technology."

Nor can governments pass laws that will fix the problem (though some are trying). And teaching students the art of fact-checking won't solve the problem, either. It goes deeper than that.

[Christopher Douglas has explored](#) the ways far-right Christian organizations that seized a place in politics paved the way for "alternative facts" by not just rejecting "theologically disturbing bodies of knowledge" such as the theory of evolution and historical-critical biblical scholarship but by creating alternative authorities: "they didn't just question the ideas and conclusions of the secular world and its institutions of knowledge. In a form of resistance, they adapted modern institutions and technologies to create bodies of counter-expertise." It's not just a retreat from commonly-held beliefs, its the creation of a separate reality that has the power to question the fundamental legitimacy of science and the academy.

Yochai Benkler, Robert Faris, Hal Roberts, and Ethan Zuckerman [showed in a study](#) of what sites people share on social media that political polarization was a pre-existing condition, not a problem caused by the architectures of social media. Those who distrusted traditional media and gravitated to new media sites anchored by Brietbart shared links from that world, unlike Clinton supporters who were much more likely to share news from traditional sources. The authors write:

... the fact that these asymmetric patterns of attention were similar on both Twitter and Facebook suggests that human choices and political campaigning, not one company's algorithm, were responsible for the patterns we observe. These patterns might be the result of a coordinated campaign, but they could also be an emergent property of decentralized behavior, or some combination of both. Our data to this point cannot distinguish between these alternatives."

Tagging a story on Facebook as dubious based on a third-party fact checking

organization is unlikely to persuade believers. Nor will Google's linking of a story to a Snopes take-down convince those who already believe Snopes is biased and untrustworthy. Some combination of audience and new media, jointly agreeing that old media was not to be trusted, created a powerful political block that not only made it possible to doubt everything, but found ways to punk traditional media. Whitney Phillips, Jessica Beyer, and Gabriella Coleman, who know troll culture, conclude [that is the lesson of our polarized news environment](#).

More than fake news, more than filter bubbles, more than insane conspiracy theories about child sex rings operating out of the backs of Washington DC pizza shops, the biggest media story to emerge from the 2016 election was the degree to which far-right media were able to set the narrative agenda for mainstream media outlets.

What Breitbart did, what conspiratorial far-right radio programs did, what Donald Trump himself did (to say nothing of what the silent contributors to the political landscape did), was ensure that what far-right pundits were talking about became what everyone was talking about, what everyone had to talk about, if they wanted to keep abreast of the day's news cycle."

So social media platforms can't fix this problem; they can make some changes, but it's not their problem to fix. If underlying divisions have led to the creation of separate and isolated worlds in which we can't agree on basic facts, what do we do? Alison Head and John Wihbey (director and a board member of Project Information Literacy) [see three key actors in tackling the problem](#): journalists, librarians, and teachers, all of whom have traditions of ethical and fair methods of doing "truth work" which have been challenged in various ways as they curate, share, and shape our information environment.

The online "[filter bubble](#)"—the algorithmic world that optimizes for confirmation of our prior beliefs, and maximizes the reach of emotion-triggering content—seems the chief villain in all this. But that's mistaking symptom for cause. The "filter" that truly matters is a layer deeper; we need to look hard at the cognitive habits that make meaning out of information in the first place. . . .

A response on all three fronts—journalism, libraries, and schools—is essential to beating back this massive assault on truth.

Social science tells us that our decisions and judgments depend more on shared community narratives than on individual rationality.”

Whether these traditional institutions, which have to various degrees been declared untrustworthy by those who gravitate to alternative institutions of knowledge, can help us negotiate the wide gap between community narratives that are so very different remains to be seen. But it's clear the fix won't be easy, and it won't be a matter of tweaking algorithms.

Terms and Conditions

June 22, 2017

It's early and I'm not quite awake when the news shows a man being shot to death – a clip I've heard already many times, but this morning I'm not alert enough to turn away and fumble for the mute button. It seems cruel and invasive to show someone's violent death over and over as if it's part of an action movie. What follows is a clip I haven't seen before, whipsawing my emotions: a small child in a squad car trying to comfort her mother who's cuffed, weeping and raging and praying for the man's life. The child is trying to calm her mom out of love and the fear her mother might be "shot" too.

Then the news anchor comes on to tell me what a brave little girl she is before it's time for North Korea or health care or a commercial break.

This intimate moment has been turned into a public drama thanks to surveillance cameras mounted in official vehicles, raw feeds to bracket the POV we saw a year ago as the woman narrated the immediate aftermath of the shooting live on Facebook with the calm voice of a documentarian, possessed of a composure that she couldn't sustain once her phone was taken from her. These instant films are a 21st century form of *testimonio* made by witnesses who tell stories that echo others, a cumulative loop of anguish repeating a story that's news to too many of us, a daily gut fear for others.

Facebook never set out to be a platform for this genre. Social media is not designed to serve social justice; it's engineered around marketing principles. Recruit an audience, engage them, keep them engaged. Learn everything you can about them so you can refine your marketing strategies. Encourage users to market themselves and accumulate an audience to get even more information and engagement. Since these platforms are where the eyeballs are, news media are letting themselves be enclosed where the ad dollars have migrated. Besides, news isn't what we don't see, it's what's already on the platform. What's trending? What's viral? Who has a story? What video can we use?

All this is on my mind as I read about the [latest ersatz drama](#) over social media posts, fodder for anger and mass political pressure. Circulate, amplify, channel the anger toward some desired goal – all while "free speech" is being used as a banner for high-stakes provocations designed to confront

and create more viral cycles of outrage because that's the whole point. Sure, some folks in the audience might become better informed after hearing a viewpoint that's new to them, but the real audience is out there online, already convinced, and legion. You don't march in Skokie to explain the Nazi cause to its residents, you do it to provoke disgust and inspire those who are already sympathetic.

All of this is good for business, of course. We click, we watch, we comment, we share – and when that gets a reaction, we do it all over again. Some call this the attention economy or surveillance capitalism, but it's also monetized emotion, encouraged, observed, magnified, and captured in metrics. It's not new, of course. Advertising has always worked this way, and news media has depended on capturing attention (remember the Maine?) but it's ubiquitous now, and the marketing medium encourages us to become authors of emotional responses and engagement. The new Twitter app updates likes and retweets in real time, a manic counter that charts our self-marketing like some hospital machine displaying vital signs.

Freedom has been a cherished value of internet culture from its early days – not just free speech but freedom from social constraints or government regulation. John Perry Barlow codified that concept in his 1996 [Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace](#), written in response to an attempt to regulate speech online. He argued governments have no jurisdiction over cyberspace, where its citizens demanded freedom just as the American revolutionaries did. “We are creating a world,” he wrote, “where anyone, anywhere may express his or her beliefs, no matter how singular, without fear of being coerced into silence or conformity.” Somehow that freedom would result in a Utopian self-governing society. “We will create a civilization of the Mind in Cyberspace. May it be more humane and fair than the world your governments have made before.”

Well, that was a bust. It's not just that laws do apply, even in cyberspace, and people squabble online just like they always have done, but the declaration assumes that cybercitizens will naturally develop a social contract that rejects colonization and property rights. How ironic that internet platforms are now the world's hottest properties, owned by giant corporations able to reap enormous profits because they are natural monopolies that operate with far fewer employees than the industry giants of the past. We cybercitizens provide free labor and content in exchange for freedom of association paid for with our identities doled out in micropayments of data, bit by gigabyte.

To a large extent, these corporations colonize the everyday experience of our lives and we accept it as the cost of online citizenship. We are market segments being poked to speak and share as the platform collects it all. When we need to bear witness, the tools at hand are the colonizer's. It's a variation on Robert Frost's [famous line](#):

*'Home is the place where, when you have to go there,
They have to take you in.'*

This corporate cyberspace is where they take all of us in, so when you are compelled to speak, you have to go there. It's speech, but it's not exactly free.

Code and Ethics

November 2, 2017

Congress is [asking some hard questions](#) about platforms they use to raise funds and get elected. Whoops! I mean, asking hard questions because they are representatives of the people. Like most of us, they're trying to do more than one thing at once. We're all caught in that dilemma. Social platforms are built for marketing even as we also use them to connect or learn or share ideas. Even when we know these platforms can do harm, It's hard for people to voluntarily remove themselves from the dominant communications channels of our day. And with that great power comes . . . you know the rest.

It's not just that Google, Facebook, and Twitter can be used by foreign powers to influence elections or to [organize a genocide](#). It's the way these platforms are designed to capture our attention and persuade us, and how those mechanisms play out when the persuasion is political. The scale of this persuasion is unprecedented. The companies involved have become incredibly wealthy and powerful but haven't caught up with their platforms' unintended consequences and don't have a clue how to proceed.

As Zeynep Tufekci said [in a talk she gave last month](#), "we're building a dystopia just to make people click on ads." Platforms that gather data on us have developed a formidable "persuasion architecture." Where that once meant putting tempting candy bars near the grocery checkout, it now means those candy bars are insinuated into our lives differently.

The platform knows you like Mounds but not Heath Bars, your blood sugar is low because you missed lunch, you read an article an hour ago that made you anxious and depressed, and a friend just posted a message mentioning chocolate. You start to respond to your friend ("I could sure use a Mounds Bar . . . ") but you delete the message before you send it. No matter. Facebook captured your half-finished message and added it to your simulated self, along with credit card purchase records, the results of personality tests, what you've been reading, and what you care about. They can sell that information to food companies, to diet programs that can play on your shameful Mounds addiction, or to political operatives who know what makes you anxious and how you might respond to that anxiety. They will also use it as training material to make their marketing schemes more effective and

personalized. The combination of massive amounts of data and artificial intelligence is engineered to sell stuff. It's not so great when it's used to engineer society. As Tufekci puts it:

. . . if the people in power are using these algorithms to quietly watch us, to judge us and to nudge us, to predict and identify the troublemakers and the rebels, to deploy persuasion architectures at scale and to manipulate individuals one by one using their personal, individual weaknesses and vulnerabilities, and if they're doing it at scale through our private screens so that we don't even know what our fellow citizens and neighbors are seeing, that authoritarianism will envelop us like a spider's web and we may not even know we're in it.

This isn't our grandparent's authoritarianism. It's not jackboots and mass demonstrations in which people make the same gestures and shout the same slogans. It's personalized authoritarianism that can invisibly work to the same ends. It's also something else – a powerful mischief machine, a way to tear us apart and make our society dysfunctional. That seems to be what Russia attempted to do: tap into our emotions and amplify them at a time when those emotions can overrule our judgment, regardless of political beliefs. The troll armies weren't partisan in their efforts to heighten tension and make us distrust each other.

Journalists [developed a set of ethical principles](#) for journalists. It took a few decades for that profession to figure this out and adopt practices and an identity based on values. Of course, reporters don't live up to them. None of us live up to our ideals. But those ideals helped develop a professional culture that at least knows what it should be doing. Google, Facebook, and Twitter have mottos and taglines, but they don't have codes of ethics that guide what they do and steer them away from unintended consequences. Social media hasn't been around for long, and these companies been too busy writing code to write codes.

We need regulations to hold these companies accountable for the mischief they profit from. Whether this congress and administration has the knowhow and will to do it is unlikely, but still, we need to think seriously about regulation. Europe has rules that protect privacy and inhibit the kind of micro-targeting that messed with our election.

These companies are realizing they need to develop the technical means

of moderating content that flows at unprecedented rates, with extraordinary reach in real time. As technical problems go, this one's a massive challenge, but without better management their platforms can become toxic waste sites. They didn't give it much thought as they built their incredibly powerful persuasion machines, so it will be hard to bolt on now. But they realize it's messing with their brands.

More than that, though, what we need is for these people who influence our lives so profoundly to shift their sense of purpose and develop a professional code of ethics to guide that purpose. Building neat stuff that attracts lots of users and piles of money is not good enough. Writing code and developing artificial intelligence that works really well isn't good enough. Slogans like "organize the world's information" and "bring the world closer together" aren't real purposes that determine their actions, not until doing those things becomes more important to engineer well than the efficient gathering, manipulating, and selling of personal data.

I don't know who will finally solve this issue, or how, but without ethics guiding what these companies do, society is facing a huge risk.

Human Subjects, Third Parties, and the Law

November 27, 2017

When you put your cell phone in your pocket or bag this morning, did you consent to have all of your movements tracked and used for research? I don't remember signing that consent form, do you? Did you also know information about every place you've been with your phone over the course of years could be obtained by law enforcement without a warrant in much of the country? [It happens, a lot](#). Two carriers got nearly 125,000 requests for this data last year. No judicial oversight was involved because the police didn't spy on you, the *phone company* did – and you said they could give your data to police without a warrant, remember? That fine print we had to agree to if we wanted to use our phones said something about lawful requests from law enforcement? You might assume “lawful” includes judicial oversight. But . . . no.

The Supreme Court will be hearing [an important privacy case](#) this week. [Back in 1979 the court decided](#) police didn't have to get a warrant to see what numbers someone dialed if they thought that person was involved in criminal activity. The majority decision said people didn't have a reasonable expectation of privacy, given the phone company kept records of who called who in order to do business. (Remember how expensive long distance calls were back then? They kept track!) This is the “[third party doctrine](#)” – if a third party collects data, and you consented to that party collecting it, no need to bother a judge.

There were two dissents in *Smith v Maryland*. The first ends with a simple statement of why metadata matters.

The numbers dialed from a private telephone – although certainly more prosaic than the conversation itself – are not without “content.” Most private telephone subscribers may have their own numbers listed in a publicly distributed directory, but I doubt there are any who would be happy to have broadcast to the world a list of the local or long distance numbers they have called. This is not because such a list might in some sense be incriminating, but because it easily could

reveal the identities of the persons and the places called, and thus reveal the most intimate details of a person's life.

The second dissent makes a relevant point about how this could go horribly wrong.

[U]nless a person is prepared to forgo use of what for many has become a personal or professional necessity, he cannot help but accept the risk of surveillance. . . . Permitting governmental access to telephone records on less than probable cause may thus impede certain forms of political affiliation and journalistic endeavor that are the hallmark of a truly free society. Particularly given the Government's previous reliance on warrantless telephonic surveillance to trace reporters' sources and monitor protected political activity, I am unwilling to insulate use of pen registers from independent judicial review.

What those guys said. We have little choice but to use our phones. That should not mean we forfeit an expectation of privacy even if we gave it up to our phone company or our search engine or the app we use to stay in touch with family. It's not unreasonable to expect that the government should not be able to literally retrace our steps without some court oversight.

As it happens, I recently [read a story](#) about how [two economists were able to analyze family relationships](#) affected by last year's presidential election. They used voting data, information about political ad placement, and massive amounts of travel information, comparing how people in contested areas behaved during Thanksgiving 2015 and 2016. They concluded families, divided by politics, spent less time together or, in their words, "27 million person-hours of cross-partisan Thanksgiving discourse were lost in 2016 to ad-fueled partisan effects." Among the data they used was information purchased from [a company](#) that sells geo-location data gathered from the cell phones of 10 million Americans providing what they call "truth-sets." (Somebody, send these guys a philosopher, stat.) The website displays logos of customers, and while the examples seem to involve business uses (e.g. "understanding of each business's popularity, taxonomy, hours, etc."), the number of universities included is striking.

Did those ten million people agree to have their location information gathered and sold by this company? Nope. They signed a contracts with

a third party. Did the economists get consent from their human subjects? What a silly question. It does not appear to have even crossed their minds.

I live in Minnesota, one of [a handful of states](#) that require police to get a warrant to use cell-phone location information. I also try to remember to keep location services turned off on my phone unless I need to get somewhere using a map. I shouldn't have to choose where to live or how to safeguard my location information to have a measure of privacy.

I hope the Supreme Court reins in warrantless surveillance. I hope someday we acquire the political will to regulate corporate surveillance. I would like to think researchers, even when purchasing massive data sets to do interesting work, might give some thought to the ethics of using data about people who never knowingly gave consent for that use. I can hope, right?

Right?

Twitter and the Bernays Bookcase

December 7, 2017

I've been reflecting on my Twitter habits lately. I haven't personally been harassed there, but I know a lot of people who have, and the company has [a bad record](#) when it comes to deciding which voices should be silenced. It also gives an unstable president a destabilizing bully pulpit of outsized influence. Twitter, like Facebook and Google, has lost the ability to fix its own problems, [throwing up its hands](#) before a Senate committee hearing. Whoops! When you design a platform to engage as much of the world as possible in instant communication, assuming the more the merrier because that's what produces your real product, enormous amounts of information that can be used to sell ads, you don't put your engineering skills into steering and brakes. Collisions are useful. Incitements to violence – oh, we didn't think about that.

The other thing that bothers me about my use of Twitter is more personal: the assumption that my identity is a product I'm selling, and Twitter is a place where I'm supposed to cash in on the attention economy by . . . seeking attention.

My affair with Twitter started innocently at a [digital humanities unconference](#) as a useful way to connect with people interested in the same things so we can have ongoing conversations and a steady flow of new ideas. That's what makes it valuable – I learn a great deal from the people I follow. I've also inadvertently learned a lot about current events in Canada, Britain, and Australia because people don't just share academic ideas, they share and reflect on what's happening in the world. So it's been good. But supporting a company that won't own up to its responsibility doesn't feel good.

Why does Twitter make me feel compelled to comment on and amplify other people's Tweets? In part it's that little dopamine bump you get when someone pays attention to you. It's also an urge to personally curate the web. Hey, look at this! I think it's important! More insidiously it tells you something about me. You will know me by my retweets.

It reminds me of the identity function of our bookshelves. We curate our personal collections so we'll have the books we want to revisit close to hand. We also keep books we may never reread but which mark a moment in our lives – there's that bit of me that earned that degree, there's that shelf of

books I read as a child and read to my children. Then there are those books we never actually read, the ones that indicate we'd score high on one of the "100 Classic Books You Should Have Read" quizzes even if we never cracked them open. Plus the ones that are simply part of the clutter that follows us everywhere.

There's a fascinating passage in Ted Striphas's [The Late Age of Print](#) that illuminates the analogy of Twitter to our bookcases. The "father of spin" (and master of marketing and propaganda) Edward Bernays was asked by book publishers how to boost business after the crash of 1929. The answer? Make bookshelves a kind of home furnishing that shows you have taste. Promoting bookcases in home and garden magazines not only gave publishers a market for their wares, the boost in book culture prepared workers for new kinds of work and consumption.

The burgeoning "consumer-oriented and information-dominated" economy of the early twentieth century required large numbers of workers proficient in the reading, sorting, processing, and distribution of information . . . Bookshelves thus embodied a specific middle-class habitus expressed in and through knowledge work and the collapse of labor and leisure. The built-in-bookshelves campaign could therefore be viewed as contributing to a complex social pedagogy whereby a growing middle class experienced the transition from a more producer-oriented to a more consumer-oriented economy.

Twitter and Facebook are the empty bookcases that we fill compulsively both to market ourselves and to be their ad market. People who write the content we share are increasingly dependent on these empty, hungry bookcases to reach an audience because that's where the audience is, not at the website the news or arts organization or individual blogger creates. I'm not comfortable with any of this.

I pulled the plug on Facebook years ago when they proudly announced Timeline – their proprietary record of my entire life. I had already been troubled by their business model and their monopolizing of online attention, but the creepy Timeline is what made me pack up and move out. I'm not ready to leave Twitter, but I want alternatives so I've checked out [Mastodon](#) ("Is anybody there? Hello?") and made smaller, more focused communities like [Metafilter](#) and the Library Society of the World's [Mokum.place](#) hangout

part of my routine. I'm also curating my dusty RSS feed reader and using [Pinboard](#) and finding more than enough to read. I suppose I could also pull some of those books I always meant to read off my bookshelves.

But I'm finding ways Twitter (and before that Facebook) has wormed its way into my life. That itch to reach for the phone and see what's new, that urge to share something I found interesting to display myself publicly by what I read, that desire to fill my attention with fragments when focusing feels like work. How ironic that we append the words "sharing" and "attention" to "economy" without any expectation of sharing profits or demanding transparency about how our attention is turned into money.

Responsible Freedoms

July 31, 2018

Supporting intellectual freedom is a bedrock principle for libraries, yet it carries with it a host of issues. Public libraries deal with challenges to books, displays, and programs constantly. They have policies and procedures in place to smooth the path, yet it's not always a simple matter. For two years in a row, [library staff in Utah were forced to remove a LGBTQ display](#) because the library system director (who does not have library training, though he has an MBA) thought it was too controversial. This year, when required to replace their LGBTQ display, they created a “libraries are for everyone” theme, which managed to skirt the ban while including LGBTQ folks.

Similar challenges were launched last year at libraries in [Texas](#) and [North Dakota](#), where the library directors pushed back. I wonder, though, if those libraries have had a similar display since. Nothing like having a state legislator say the library had promoted “an ideology of sexual fluidity, promiscuity, experimentation and deviation” to put a chill on things. (The North Dakota lawmaker also complained they didn't include anti-LGBTQ books in the display to show “both sides.”) Meanwhile, [in Iowa](#) a group protested the presence of LGBTQ books in the Orange City library. The [group](#) includes in their arguments that the library should avoid encouraging people to learn about sexuality because gay people are in danger of committing suicide. Gee, I wonder why? The same group attacks local churches and church-affiliated colleges in Iowa for theological error and “false teaching,” but the library seems a particular focus for their activism.

Public libraries are locally funded (so they have to be sensitive to local interests and concerns) and are part of the government (so they must develop policies that are consistent with the first amendment). They also have gentle gatekeepers. There's only so much money and so much room on the shelves, so things are chosen by librarians, taking into account the community's recommendations, interests, and tastes. These library challenges are small, local skirmishes negotiated among neighbors. Though they are fraught disagreements driven by national polarities, you're likely to run into each other at the county fair or the grocery store. The people involved share some cultural context.

On the internet, things get more complicated. Context is fragmented.

News is ripped from its source and repackaged in granular bits, often with no clues about whether it's news, opinion, or satire. Cultures collide and fragment and some people feel empowered to say things they probably wouldn't if face-to-face. (A writer [recently](#) decided to ask trolls who attack women online why they do it. Men comfortable calling women they didn't know c*** and b**** responded to her questions with more vitriol and, when she didn't take the bait, many of them blocked her. Some irony in being blocked for not being intimidated.) The near-global reach of Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube depends on working with laws of the countries where they operate. Much more difficult to adjudicate are the multitudes of cultural norms. These platforms have their own rules of engagement, a body of laws for their "communities" (in the case of Facebook, it's larger than any country on earth) spelled out in the fine print of a terms of service agreement, but they are enforced haphazardly, and you can't train artificial intelligence without humans first making decisions. What's a difficult negotiation in a town of 6,000 is mindboggling at global scale and at high volume.

Ron Wyden, a senator from Oregon, was one of the authors of [a section](#) of the 1996 Communications Decency Act to protect freedom of speech online by allowing platforms to self-regulate and avoid being liable for users' speech. There would be no Facebook, no Twitter, no YouTube, no Reddit, you name it, if companies were required to take responsibility for every utterance posted. Americans may [want more control over their privacy](#), something Wyden is working on, but they really [would prefer not to have the government decide](#) what can be posted online. [So would Wyden](#), but he sees this moment as a time of reckoning. The hands-off provision Congress crafted in 1996 was intended to improve society through innovative means of sharing ideas. If the social benefit piece of that contract is not taken seriously, if the profit motive drives decisions without responsibility, there may be changes ahead.

Social responsibility is a core value of librarianship, along with intellectual freedom. Trying to figure out how to do both isn't always simple, and on the vast global scale of these American companies, that conflict seems to be coming to a head. Preparing students to judge information and be able to think for themselves is an interesting challenge in such a volatile information environment.

Alexa: Tell Me How to Succeed in College

August 5, 2018

I have a hard time understanding why anyone would want to place a surveillance device in their home so they can play music, check the weather, or look up a Wikipedia article without having to use the phone that is probably already in their hand. These gadgets (such as Amazon's Echo or Google's Home) make lots of sense for people with sight impairments, but for the rest of us? I don't get it, particularly since they relay information about our private lives to the mothership and, when hooked up to smart devices, make your house extremely [hackable](#).

So I was none too thrilled to read that three universities have decided to show how innovative they are [by giving students Echo Dots](#) that will be trained to answer questions students might have, like "when is finals week?" or "is the library open?" Eventually, proponents hope they will be able to answer highly personalized questions – "what grade did I get on my chemistry test?" – and even become personal tutors. Because going to college is all about spending time in your room talking to a sentient hockey puck.

A funny thing: in 2013, when Google began to roll out Google Glass, a virtual assistant you could wear on your head like glasses, there was a backlash that effectively tanked the product for the consumer market. People were unhappy about the notion of being recorded by people wearing these gadgets who were also rich enough to buy the expensive prototype. Surveillance cameras are one thing; in this case you could see who was violating your privacy and you could see it actually happening. This is similar to the reaction you get when someone says "I'm not worried about privacy because I have nothing to hide" but balks when you ask for their phone so you can read their messages. When you actually see a privacy violation as it happens and see the person doing it, it's much more upsetting than if it's invisibly in the background and no humans appear to be involved, though of course, they are. Inviting Alexa into your bedroom is kind of like inviting a bunch of strangers to sit beside your bed and take notes.

Another thing that's not so funny: these devices invite you to ask questions,

but their answers aren't always factually correct. How do they respond when the [question is complex](#) or there isn't [a singular answer](#)? (The second link is to a paywalled WSJ article, worth looking up through your library if you don't subscribe.) How hard would it be to [game Google's algorithms](#) to give out the answers you prefer? Google search is not a library, it's a sort-of-library where people bring their stuff to be shelved by a secret classification system and half the books are trying to sell you something. Search engine optimization works the same for selling hate as for selling hats. Apart from its fallibility, in a higher ed setting, do we want to convey that questions have a single answer that's easily found?

I would love to see the privacy policy provided to students. How much information is shared with college staff? How much is shared with Amazon? Can students purge information from its history? Can campus police or other law enforcement use recordings in an investigation? Can the policy be read in under 30 minutes and understood without a JD? What about people who didn't agree to the policy but are captured as they visit the student who lives with an Echo? What do you do if some joker visits your room and orders up fifteen pizzas to be charged to your credit card?

How much is the university spending on these things? The devices are inexpensive because you provide a service to the company – a stream of data about your life and a frictionless way to make an impulse purchase) but it's not just the cost of the devices. Arizona State has several FTE devoted to programming the fleet of hockey pucks to do things like play the school's fight song. If you want these devices to do anything that isn't out-of-the-box you have to teach it “skills,” first. This is how big tech makes so much money with relatively few employees – other people have create the content or drive personally-owned cars or whatever it is you're disrupting. You might remember that a few years ago Arizona State [decided to fix a budget shortfall](#) by upping the course load for first-year writing instructors from four courses per semester to five without additional pay. Negotiations improved the deal – instructors teaching ten writing courses in a year would earn \$40,000. They should be teaching hockey pucks instead of students.

We need to ask “cui bono?” when we look at technological ways to “improve student learning” (which is often another way of saying “to improve our retention stats”) and “personalize learning” (which is often another way of saying “this product will help us trim staff, or cope with the problems we caused when we trimmed staff”). When we outsource the human touch to algorithms to solve institutional problems, we're also giving our students'

lives and experiences to other people, and we don't have the right to do that. In this case, I suspect giving out Alexas is a Shiny New Thing, not a trend, but it's emblematic of how little we value students' autonomy when we don't value their privacy.

Innocence and Experience

November 25, 2018

Maybe some chickens are coming home to roost. Tech stocks have [become less irrationally exuberant](#). People seem [annoyed](#) about Amazon's stunt extort bribes from cities in return for making housing more unaffordable and transit more crowded, just to attract some high-paying jobs to cities that already have a big wealth gap. UK members of parliament [have grown so irritated](#) that Facebook has ignored their inquiries that they dragged a tech startup founder who was visiting London to Parliament, forcing him to turn over documents about Facebook that he had obtained thanks to a pending lawsuit. (He just happened to be [carrying copies of documents obtained through discovery on his laptop](#). Let that be a lesson to us all.) And [whoops](#), turns out Facebook's chief operating officer actually was aware that they'd hired a sleazy firm to discredit Facebook opponents, including George Soros who has become a useful all-purpose boogeyman for anti-Semites and conspiracy theorists.

There are rumblings of discontent, but it's not at all clear how we're going to stop the flow of alternative facts, disinformation, and spectacle that is the lifeblood of the vaporous tech industry. If their purpose is to keep us online and clicking, it's working all too well. A disturbing [double profile](#) in the Washington Post shows two people, disaffected and out of work who spend lots of time online. One creates nonsense posts on a Facebook site to taunt those who take them seriously. The other takes them seriously as they enter a flood of links that she scrolls through. The faker makes a lot of money, with as many as six million visitors in a good month generating \$15,000 in ad revenue. The retired woman who clicks to like and share his made-up stories without noticing the disclaimers gets to feel part of something important, that she's shoring up a country that's under attack. How can reality compete with that mission, particularly when your day-to-day reality is relatively dreary?

Of course, social media didn't create the attractiveness of a thrilling conspiracy and the urge to connect over it. We've had talk radio and combative talking heads on cable news for decades. Before that we had yellow journalism and traveling medicine shows. We've always had gossip. But there's something simultaneously isolating and seductive about sharing

simulated outrage online using platforms built for engagement, and before long alternate facts congeal into an alternate reality.

As [Mike Caulfield points out](#), this digital hyperreality, this time spent immersed online, becomes an experience that is more real than real life, which lacks the compelling narratives, the apocalyptic threats, the fevered dreams, the coherence. The experience the woman has as she clicks is real even if the facts that constitute that experience are false. When a man goes online to write nonsensical stories that bring in ad dollars, he's hacking her digital reality. As Caulfield puts it, "because of the phenomenon of hyperreality, she is more likely to trust her digital experience than her non-digital experience. She simply has accumulated far more influential experiences online, and to the extent that her online experience differs from other mediated realities, it's the non-digital that is seen as not fitting" – so a news story that contradicts her rich, interconnected digital life must be what is false.

We've never had a medium designed so well to immerse us in a hyperreal flow of unchecked, unverified, imaginary narratives that engage us in liking, in sharing, in commenting, in spending hours of our days following threads connecting one shocking story to another. The engineers of attention have become engineers of emotion and experience. A man sitting in a room alone writing lies can make more money than a journalist, and his stories look just as real even though he has clearly labeled them as false. We can't fight falsehood with truth or gullibility with finger-pointing sarcasm. Given our current information infrastructure, everyone can "do the research" and choose their own reality. It's hard to know how we'll get out of this choose-your-own adventure because the inventors of it seem completely at a loss themselves. But these media have not been around all that long. They haven't faced much opposition or scrutiny. That may well be changing, and none too soon.

Meanwhile, I guess we keep doing whatever we can to help our students understand information – where it comes from, how it circulates, what to make of it, and how to handle it responsibly. I don't know what else we can do until we find a way to put some brakes on our immersive hyperreality machines.

Not-So-Funhouse Mirrors

December 3, 2018

So, a for-profit “Christian” “university” founded by an evangelical pastor that is being investigated for fraud is connected to some 140 LLCs that, among other things, run Amazon storefronts selling cheap goods at high prices as well as a publishing empire (also being investigated for fraud) that purchased Newsweek magazine at a bargain-bin price (firing Newsweek journalists who began to investigate their owners) and, incidentally, also runs storefronts including a bookstore that isn’t exactly running like a bookstore (you want to buy a book? Are you sure?) . . . it’s a wild story. Art history professor and sometime-journalist [Jenny Odell has pulled all the threads](#) and ended up with a big ball of “what the heck is going on here?” for which she has no answer. It’s as if someone created an artificial intelligence bot and trained it on a mix of Amazon shopping habits, money laundering practices, and prosperity gospel evangelism before setting it loose to whirl and spin off fraudulent businesses, a web of simulated reality that somehow is profitable.

This kind of unanticipated use of platform capitalism isn’t entirely new. Remember when, just after Amazon launched its self-publishing platform, weird books started showing up for sale that were random compilations of Wikipedia articles? Perfectly legal, because Wikipedia articles are in the public domain, but the packaging was designed to defraud people, and it often worked. I suppose we could go back to the early days of printing and the ways printers jumbled together stuff and sold it before the concept of copyright vested power in authors to control their work so it couldn’t scamper away and reproduce in unexpected places. Or we could contemplate [machine-generated academic papers](#) (so much more efficient than writing them!)* and [automated essay graders](#) (so much more efficient than reading them or, you know, teaching students anything).

It’s not without precedent. But there is something disturbing about the complexity and sheer weirdness of this scheme, as if it pulled some bits of modern life together into a shell company game where they began to replicate feverishly – website after website, company upon company, a simulation of contemporary commerce, all of it . . . melted into air, thin air. It’s fitting that one connecting thread Odell found among all of these businesses and websites is the word “dream.” This web of enterprises is made

of such stuff as entrepreneurial dreams are made of. Great globalization shall dissolve, their cloud capped towers and gorgeous palaces made of baseless fabric, an insubstantial pageant.

I'm reminded of James Bridle's creepy [discovery](#) of a wormhole in YouTube that sucks in small children whose parents unwittingly hand them a phone playing a kids' show hoping for an hour of peace. An entire industry has sprung up to warp children's programming. Yes, some of it is deliberately twisted by trolls who want to turn popular cartoon characters into mass murderers for a laugh, but much of it is algorithmically remixed and reproduced with bits rearranged in ways that make the videos not only deeply weird but often violent because the algorithm works that way – dragging us deeper and deeper into the muck. It's why it's so easy to deny facts – you can [manufacture alternatives and web them together into an alternative reality](#) and, for a variety of reasons, people will gravitate to that web and become stuck there.

I'm not sure what to conclude about all this other than that we must insist on designing humanistic values into our artificial systems, that we must compel systems that are designed to reward grotesque simulations and mindless faulty reproductions to change their rewards systems, that we must simultaneously oppose censorship and promote truth against invented falsehoods. The odd thing is I think we can do it, if we really want to. We found ways to [take out the garbage](#) in the past. It was clear the internet would be broken if we didn't. There's more garbage now, and much more money involved, but we depend too much on networked information to let the entire system become corrupted by fraud and chicanery. When the internet became an engine of commerce with attention as a currency, we neglected to build in the brakes. It's not too late, or so must hope.

*Though the example I linked is satirical, there is [an actual product](#) on the market. So much more efficient than hiring someone to write your paper for you.

Three Paradoxes

February 28, 2019

*How quaint the ways of Paradox!
At common sense she gaily mocks!
A most ingenious paradox.
~The Pirates of Penzance*

Paradox 1. Personalization

The systems we engage with online love to provide “personalization” by learning who we are, our interests, our habits, our associations so as to “improve the customer experience.” It would be inefficient to make our own choices among a generic list of movies or news articles or search results about that rash on our elbow. Those results should be hand-picked by an invisible concierge who knows what we have watched, read, and been worried about in the past. Our machines of loving grace know us well. We’re practically engaged.

But human beings? It’s so much work interacting with them, even for trivial tasks. Why be forced to chat with a cashier when you can scan your groceries yourself? The cashier might notice you’re buying unhealthy snacks. That could be an embarrassing intrusion on your privacy. Why visit a bookstore where the owner might want to talk about what you like to read as you browse the shelves? How intrusive! Yet we don’t seem to mind that Amazon tracks every move we make as we browse their site. We just don’t see it happening.

We’re being groomed to avoid people (who require costly wages) while accepting the all-seeing eye watching us online. The “improved customer experience,” of course, has everything to do with making money – either by being more effective at selling you a consumer good, getting you to click on an ad, or adding more personally identified information to the vast data pool that can become training data for behavior modification. In other words, *we’re* being personalized.

Paradox 2. Freedom of Speech

Platforms that do not create speech but make a handy profit from distributing it have claimed the high ground of the First Amendment. Speech should only be regulated in the rarest of instances. The cure for hate speech is more speech. Tech platforms, of course, are not governed by the first

amendment, which only relates to what the state can or cannot do, but tech culture has embraced free speech as a principle. John Perry Barlow's 1996 [Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace](#) was modeled on the US Declaration of Independence, and it states "anyone, anywhere may express his or her beliefs, no matter how singular, without fear of being coerced into silence or conformity."

Of course, cyberspace has never been independent. Servers and headquarters have real-world addresses and tech companies must comply with local law. In addition, the profitable platforms we use to express ourselves, search, and share require us to agree to terms of service, legally enforceable restrictions that give the platforms governance over speech. How those rules are enforced can be capricious and self-serving. A private citizen might be suspended from Twitter for speech that doesn't knock the Tweeter-in-Chief offline. Moreover, these platforms profit from "sticky" content. Their algorithmic regulation of speech can promote or suppress speech for business reasons. Best of all, in the US they have a get-out-of-jail-free card. Section 203 of the Telecommunications Act of 1996 (the one that put John Perry Barlow in such a revolutionary frame of mind) immunizes platforms from responsibility for the speech they make public. They can have free speech, regulate it at will, and escape any responsibility. What a sweet deal! Of course, in other countries with different laws these platforms censor and suppress speech while waving a free-speech banner at their US headquarters.

Speech online, it turns out is not free as in speech; it's free as in beer, a commodity with a tap on it that can be turned on or off.

Paradox 3. Security

Once upon a time Americans were deeply suspicious of the capabilities of computers to gather and process information. That changed after 9/11. Suddenly sharing all of our data was vital for our safety, or so we were led to believe. Now, thanks to our enthusiasm for sharing everything, even our DNA, we're incredibly unsafe. This is partly thanks to our intelligence agencies' preference for offense (such as hoarding vulnerabilities in software to use for espionage purposes) over defense (such as notifying software companies of vulnerabilities, thus making it harder for foreign powers to spy on us). Surveillance capitalism, which evades the very few constitutional provisions that protect our privacy from the government, depends on lots of personal data being collected. The data we generate incidentally online is valuable both to corporations and the state, which often work hand in

hand. If the state is prohibited from, say, collecting DNA from people who aren't suspected of a crime, they can just get it from a third party. The police might get in trouble if they tracked information about every vehicle traveling through their jurisdiction, but they don't have to because they can buy it off the shelf from a company that collects that information across the country.

The paradox here is that the security excuse for gathering data actually increases our risk. Most of our data is the equivalent of toxic waste. It piles up and can leach into unexpected places. Collecting data means it will be exploited – by companies, by the state, by anyone with the technical chops. We're going to regret the day we ever thought “collect it all” was a good way to keep us safe.

And when any company says “we take your privacy seriously,” beware.

Plagiarism Policing and Profit

March 8, 2019

John Warner had [a perfect response](#) to the news that Turnitin [has been sold](#) for big bucks. First imagined in 1998, it launched [as an ed-tech product along with the Plagiarism.org](#) site in 2000, but even then it had ambitions to be [used in publishing](#) as well. It has been bought and sold a number of times, most recently to Advance Publishing, which also owns Condé Nast, the Discovery Channel, and a majority share of Reddit, of all things. We know Turnitin as the strong-arm enforcer in the classroom for policing plagiarism at scale and at a distance.

There are [all kinds of things wrong](#) with this product, including the blistering irony of demanding that students surrender their intellectual property in order to detect theft of intellectual property, but as John points out, the real issue is that it undermines teachers and students by turning plagiarism into a machine-readable problem. Students cope by learning to fool the machine. What they don't learn is how to write. Pedagogy always trumps technology, but it's easier to spend money on tech than on teachers. And tech has marketplace value.

What particularly struck me is how perfect an example this is of Shoshanna Zuboff's thesis in her book [The Age of Surveillance Capitalism](#) (which, yes, I'm still reading – it's long.) She describes this era of capitalism as a new economic order that claims human experience as exploitable free raw material for tools for prediction and behavior modification. That's exactly what Turnitin has done. Step one: create the need – we don't want to fund teachers and manageable class sizes, so we outsource the plagiarism problem to a for-profit company that has a side gig of promoting the importance of the problem it promises to solve. Step two: devise a way to grab volumes of data without paying those whose data is grabbed. Step three: [!!!profit!!!](#)

Dispossession, surveillance, power, and profit. This thing that just sold for \$1.75 billion will not pay a dime to those who fed the machine close to two decades of content and labor, nor to the institutions who paid hefty annual fees to hire a digital rent-a-cop. As Zuboff points out, this isn't just appropriation of things we generate in the course of our lives, it's the appropriation of our freedom, all in the name of platitudes like “connecting

the world” and “organize the world’s information” and “passionate about helping students learn.” These once human activities are now automated and insanely profitable, machines humming along learning about us and rendering our experiences into prediction and control in a digital world that is increasingly a hall of cloudy and crazed mirrors [full of fakes](#).

Adulthood for the Web

March 13, 2019

The web turned thirty this week. I still remember when I heard about it, nearly thirty years ago. A central-casting computer geek from our IT department tried to describe this new, exciting thing to me as I was trying to figure out if I could do something with hypercards on the NeXT computer that had improbably landed on my desk. It would be better than hypercards, better than Gopher, he told me, which seemed pretty innovative for its time. It wouldn't be WAIS, either. It would be WYSIWYG and you would be able to go from one file to another directly with a mouse click. It was going to change everything.

He was right about that.

At the very beginning, before Sir Tim Berners-Lee got around to creating the first browser to run this new idea of his, it [looked like this](#), but soon it [looked like this](#). (Oddly enough, it [was born on a NeXT computer](#) a lot like mine, only more battered.)

The World Wide Web (as we called it then) was a little like [Vannevar Bush's Memex](#). You could sit at your desk and call up information. If you knew how to do it, you could make your own websites and connect information yourself in "trails of association," linking one document to another by creating relationships between them. Bush predicted some people would become professional "trail blazers," providing guides through it all. Right now, that makes me think of [Maria Popova](#), but when the web was new, the busy curators of the [World Wide Web Virtual Library](#) were our guide to all the good stuff out there. It took a while for search engines to come along, and they didn't work all that well, not until that nice, tidy one that wasn't covered in ads came along. What we didn't know is that those discreet ads tucked away at the margins would be so much more powerful than the blinking banners of the past. Or that the deliriously liberating [promise of Web 2.0](#) would give us a world where [Facebook is the internet](#) for many people worldwide.

Today, Sir Tim [encourages us](#) to see beyond the problems in our digital communications that the web enabled and think about how to make an older, wiser web a reality.

Against the backdrop of news stories about how the web is misused, it's understandable that many people feel afraid and unsure if the web is really a force for good. But given how much the web has changed in the past 30 years, it would be defeatist and unimaginative to assume that the web as we know it can't be changed for the better in the next 30. If we give up on building a better web now, then the web will not have failed us. We will have failed the web.

He points to three problems and has solutions for each. People use the web to do bad things; okay, that means we need to develop better laws and smarter code. Too much of the web is driven by perverse incentives; that means companies need to develop better ethics, and he believes tech workers are ready to take up that challenge. Unintended negative outcomes of design decisions also need to be fixed; there are plenty of smart humanists and social scientists studying how people interact online who are on it. He goes on to say

The fight for the web is one of the most important causes of our time. Today, half of the world is online. It is more urgent than ever to ensure the other half are not left behind offline, and that everyone contributes to a web that drives equality, opportunity and creativity.

He's part of a movement to develop a new [Contract for the Web](#), a collective effort to spell out what we want to see happen. At a time when we rely so much on the web, where the platforms that dominate it seem both enormously powerful and fundamentally irresponsible, it's good to remember it's only 30 years old. We still have time to make it right.

Skinner at the Googleplex

April 4, 2019

I don't know much about B.F. Skinner, and what little I know makes me uncomfortable in the way hearing about eugenics makes me queasy. Operant conditioning. Behavior modification. Ideas about science that surely we've left behind, though they cast their shadows on the present. So it was striking to read two books recently that refer to Skinner's weird utopian novel, *Walden Two*.

Published in 1948 and popularized in the late 1960s, the novel describes an ideal commune where life is optimized for happiness and productivity. Behind the scenes, a God-like behavioral scientist sets up conditions that will improve the lives of the people in the community. The whole thing is an ongoing experiment as he constantly tunes and refines his model society based on the scientific technology of behavior.

Education comes in for thorough reform in *Walden Two*. No need to have curricula or faculty or credentials. No need to study the past. "History tells us nothing," the visionary scientific leader proclaims – because it doesn't "set up the experiment the right way." There's a Year Zero zeal in this vision of a society without a memory, without politics, without freedom because Skinner thought it wasn't relevant to optimizing human happiness.

I was intrigued to learn *Walden Two* has a library, one vigorously weeded of useless material. As the scientific engineer of the model community puts it:

"Have you ever spent much time in a large college library? What trash the librarian has served up in order to report a million volumes in the college catalog! Bound pamphlets, old journals, ancient junk that even the shoddiest of secondhand bookstore would clear from its shelves – all saved on the flimsy pretext that some day someone will want to study they 'history of a field.' Here [at *Walden Two*] we have the heart of a great library – not much to please the scholar or specialist, perhaps, but enough to interest the intelligent reader for life. Two or three thousand volumes will do it.... we subtract from our shelves as often as we add to them. The result is a collection that never misses fire. We all get something vital every time we take a

book from the shelves. If anyone wants to follow a special interest we arrange for loans. If anyone wants to browse, we have half a barn full of discarded volumes.”

It's not clear who does this vigorous pruning of the collection, but the visitor-narrator of the novel discovers it's extremely well-managed, later admiring “the clairvoyance with which the Walden Two librarians had collected most of the books I had always wanted to read.” Of course, it may be he has been conditioned to believe the books provided are the ones he wants to read. That seems to be how Walden Two works.

These passages can give librarians the giggles. Weeding a library can be highly contentious, though in most situations it's a valuable practice, and yes, we hear the “someone someday” reason for keeping everything. We're also frequently told we're bad at curation and buy the wrong books – too many of them are rarely or never checked out. But from my quick browse of the novel, I can't find exactly how these scientific librarians are able to develop a small collection so successfully. The science promises everything but is a bit of a black box.

And this is why suddenly an out-of-fashion utopian novel is being mentioned again. So much of tech solutionism is utopian. By adopting these innovative technologies we'll be happier, more productive, more connected and informed. Behind the scenes in a black box the scientists run their experiments and tweak their behavioral cues. Yes, there's something sinister about that. Shoshana Zuboff's *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* delves into the ways tech companies perform behavior modification in a continual experiment and sees this secretive conditioning as the usurpation of freedom and a totalitarian threat. The next book I picked up was Jenny Odell's *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy*, which also ties *Walden Two* to our present predicament (and pointed me to that library passage). Silicon Valley visionaries are perfectly happy to nudge and shape us in order to own our attention. Odell points out that Peter Thiel's interest in creating utopian societies through initiatives like the Seasteading Institute is based on a belief that freedom and democracy are incompatible, that only exceptional geniuses like him have the vision to build social machinery that will make the world a better, more efficient place.

What's curious, though, is that the utopian ideals that our most profitable tech platforms adopt for mottos don't have much to do with what they *actually do*. Their behavior modification technologies are geared not toward

increasing productivity or happiness but toward [snaring your attention and stirring your emotions](#). So while they project a smiling-but-creepy vision of a behaviorally-controlled utopia, we end up with technologies of discord, distraction, and compulsive consumption.

In the utopian community of Walden Two, the library is limited to only a few thousand of the best books, carefully selected by some higher intelligence to be just what the community needs. Facebook, Google, and Amazon didn't go that route. Oddly enough, YouTube's CEO defended the platform as being like a library. "There have always been controversies, if you look back at libraries," she told South by Southwest attendees last year, as if defending *Heather Has Two Mommies* is just like hosting ISIS recruiting videos or live-action white supremacist violence. YouTube is the opposite of the Walden Two library – no curation, just an algorithmic promotion of "engagement" that pushes viewers to the extremes, because that's where the money is.

I wouldn't want to live in Walden Two, even if I trusted its scientific leadership to act on my behalf. What's fascinating is that we live in a world shaped by the worst of Skinnerian principles – people are to be experimented on to influence their behavior without their knowledge – but with all the post-war idealism and faith in scientific advancement cast aside in favor of nothing more elevated than selling more ads and getting more clicks. Some utopia.

Promises, Promises

May 9, 2019

All of the tech giants are suddenly into privacy. Apple started it, [fighting off a federal demand](#) to decrypt a phone and break a promise to their customers that their data, if not stored in the cloud, is secure, even from Apple. (The feefs dropped the demand once they found they could pay an Israeli company a cool million to hack the phone, though it's just the [latest](#) in federal attempts to insist on encryption backdoors). Apple found privacy polished their brand and gave them a leg up over Google, which also sells phones but makes most of its money on a digital ad system that relies on not respecting your privacy. But wait, [Google respects your privacy!](#) And confuses it with security, which Google handles pretty well, so long as you don't mind Google being up in your business. Even [Facebook has suddenly found Privacy Jesus](#). We'll keep watching everything you do, but we'll stop saying privacy is over and transparency is next to godliness. At least until the [FTC gets off our case](#) and we squelch all that annoying [antitrust talk](#) so we can turn all of our properties into one behemoth that will be too big to fail, just like those banks.

You would think libraries, like Apple, could use privacy to burnish their brand. We've talked a good game, and sometimes walked the walk. Protecting privacy is a [core value](#) and in our [code of ethics](#). But we face a couple of pressures. One is that we aren't actually able to guarantee patron privacy. We don't control the levers on most of our digital gadgetry and [publishers want to know more information](#) than we should give them. (This can [end in tears](#).) It would help if we also stopped putting social media beacons and Google analytics on our webpages without thinking about how that violates privacy. (Duh.)

But beyond that, we willfully trade student privacy for reassurance that our libraries have value to our host institutions. There are many ways we could ethically study student learning and find out how to make students' learning experiences better. But the variables are so entangled you really need to design solid qualitative studies and that doesn't always satisfy administrators who want numbers and dashboards and attractively-colored charts. They want proof, and numbers don't lie (though if you torture them,

they'll say anything). The [Data Doubles](#) project is taking a good look at student privacy and libraries. [Good stuff](#). Read it. Weep. Then do better.

What I wish is that academic libraries and the institutions they serve would stop falling for the “[digital snake oil](#)” of learning analytics. But it keeps coming! Apparently – did you know this? – we haven’t changed the way we teach for a thousand years and we don’t know what we’re doing, but computation and moar data will fix it. [Carnegie Mellon wants to engineer learning](#). Of course they do, those geeks! They won’t have trouble spending \$100 million on a project like this.

But whenever I hear “engineering” in the context of living, breathing people, I can’t help but think of Stalin. He had [different tools in mind](#): “The production of souls is more important than the production of tanks . . . And therefore I raise my glass to you, writers, the engineers of the human soul.” That engineering brought us Socialist Realism but man, would Uncle Joe ever love what Putin can do today with code. Or rather, what state-sponsored creative writers can do with the platforms running code written by American companies that are now telling us once again and without sincerity that our privacy is important to them.

Leaving Las Vegas

May 19, 2019

We're just wrapping up the semester for our new short course with a long title, "Clickbait, Bias, and Propaganda in Information Networks." It was inspired by a history professor, who asked a couple of us librarians to talk to her first term seminar about what we were innocently calling "fake news" before that term was coopted to mean the established press. She thought students needed more, so we designed a seven-week course to introduce [Mike Caulfield's "four moves" heuristic](#) and explore how the information networks we use daily circulate and shape the information we encounter.

One of the problems in trying to teach this stuff is that it's constantly morphing as people figure out new ways to use social media to persuade and confuse audiences. Alex Kasprak, a reporter for Snopes, [detailed the ways one self-described evangelical](#) has created a network of Facebook groups purporting to represent a variety of groups – Blacks for Trump, Catholics for Trump, Seniors for Trump, Veterans for Trump, Teachers for Trump – all of them pushing nearly-identical Islamophobic propaganda. Her work is connected to some shady PACs and non-profits and a fair amount of money is involved, but nobody (including Facebook) wanted to talk to Kasprak about it. Another [report from Citizen Lab](#) examines how a disinformation network, possibly based in Iran, has found ways to mimic news outlets to spread false narratives that look like legitimate news and are sometimes picked up by real news sites; then they vanish, redirecting visitors to the authentic sites, making verification difficult. (They give this network the evocative name "Endless Mayfly.") A lot of work goes into setting up these networks. It takes even more work to track down their origins. Meanwhile, their messages get spread through social media channels and compete for our divided attention. Platforms designed for advertising are ripe for abuse.

The Internet has arguably become a "disinformation laboratory," where everything from tools to messaging can be tested with an eye to maximize impact and elude detection. Because some of the most widely used online spaces have become data-driven platforms for [digital marketing](#), we suspect that many disinformation operations now mimic online marketing campaigns and tweak their content

to maximize views, clicks, or shares. Disinformation operations can therefore quickly adopt and discard tools and tactics, and regularly tweak their operations to maximize impact and reach.

In the meantime, the White House has sent confusing signals. On the one hand, Trump is [leading the charge](#) to tell tech companies they must stop enforcing their rules against conservatives. This claim leads to ridiculous situations, like [Facebook bringing a site run by The Daily Caller aboard for fact-checking](#), apparently to prove they aren't suppressing alternative facts. It also led Twitter to invent two standards of conduct – one for ordinary users and another for “newsworthy” figures – like the president, who can violate the terms of service with impunity. Meanwhile, the administration [has rejected an initiative](#) led by New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern [to find ways to reduce extremism online](#). This doesn't entirely surprise me. Any administration would have to thread a tricky constitutional needle if promising to suppress speech. But it seems inconsistent to hold hearing in Congress and [collect the email addresses](#) of aggrieved social media users, using ALL CAPS OUTRAGE to push tech companies around while stepping back and washing hands of taking action against violent extremists. As Tarleton Gillespie, who literally [wrote the book](#) on internet moderation, said in [an interesting Twitter thread](#), “it's easier to cry foul, that you're being targeted for your political beliefs, than to wonder if maybe your political tactics are now beyond the pale of a culture that's trying to balance robust free speech with some semblance of citizenship, obligation, and consensus.”

Silicon Valley started building its castles in the air with one simple ethic: free speech is good, the more the merrier. In reality, free speech is complicated, as the tech companies are discovering. They have always moderated content, especially when it comes to copyright, but the difficulty of moderating speech on platforms designed to optimize the spread of attention-seeking messages has landed them with culturally and politically difficult work to do that can't be solved by tweaking algorithms. The [Christchurch Call](#) went out not just to governments but to tech providers. Some of them [have responded with an elaborate shrug](#): It's not what happens on the internet that's the problem, it's what happens in society – not our problem. That denies the complex relationship between people and organizations and the technologies they use to find converts, spread the word, and create confusion.

It's interesting that this tangled intersection of technology and culture

first took root in the United States, where we have enshrined the idea of freedom of speech in our constitution. We should know, given a couple of centuries of case law, that [it's complicated](#). Having exported these tools of communication globally, we have a responsibility to figure this out in a way that allows both freedom of expression and social responsibility and a framework for balancing them wisely. Too much is at stake.

Whatever happens, we won't have any shortage of things to talk about if we offer this course again.

On Not Being Able to Tell Fakes From Good Reporting

November 24, 2019

As frequently happens to me (probably the fault of never quite overcoming being an undergraduate), I came across three new research reports on the same day that seem connected.

The first came out earlier this month, but I somehow missed it. “[Students’ Online Civic Reasoning: A National Portrait](#)” should be required reading for anyone who cares about information, news, civic or digital literacy. (That should pretty much cover all of us.) The Stanford History Education Group, which has previously studied how both [students](#) and [history professors](#) struggle with evaluating information found online, has new results that suggest that, despite a host of efforts to fight “fake news,” high school students are no better prepared today to sort misinformation from reliable sources. Hardly any performed well on a series of tasks that are the kind of basic information decisions we have to make multiple times a day. Whatever we’re doing for students, it’s not working and, as the study authors point out, these kids are almost voting age.

[Another study](#), this one from PEN America, shows local news (meaning news coverage based in places like Baltimore and Chicago, not just tiny towns) is fading fast. The invaluable Margaret Sullivan lays out [the implications](#): want stories that uncover grift in city hall or in the halls of the rich and famously untouchable? You need local reporters. This is mostly the denouement of a long story of extractive greed. Newspapers, which were once quite profitable, began to be scooped up some years ago to create big bundles of profit. Now that we have all the information we can shake a stick at apparently for free, and advertising belongs to Google and Facebook, the financial vultures are swooping in to buy up, dismantle and pick the bones of what’s left. Yes, there are bright spots. New ventures have found alternatives to being run like a business right into the ground – but we need solutions that aren’t small, local and dependent on the kindness of philanthropists.

Nor can news (or people who care about quality news) depend on the kindness of the social media giants that soak up so much attention and the digital dollars that come with it. The [Tow Center just published a study](#)

that explores how news organizations have been victimized by social media, which keeps making promises that don't pan out. News organizations can't escape the gravitational pull social media exerts on readers and can't recoup the digital dollars that go to these incredibly wealthy and powerful intermediaries, so they have to go with whatever new schemes the giants cook up, but in the evocative words of one research subject [quoted in the Columbia Journalism Review](#), "it's like we're wounded animals and wondering if they're going to shoot us or try to give us just enough medical help to keep us alive so we can continue to serve them."

These issues seem knotted together to me, in the Gordian sense. Students can't tell what's news and what's misinformation because they don't understand how to navigate our current, messy digital information environment, where it's profitable to lie but not so much to tell the truth. Newspapers are being killed by vulture capitalists, and the advertising market that once paid for news has been taken over by a few big companies that hold all the power. We can work on helping our students figure out what makes information good, what kinds of processes and ethical considerations go into seeking truth and telling it, but as citizens we also have to think about how we can ensure quality news is there when we need it.

We need better civic literacy, but we also need better civics. We need new policy, and for that we need to break the grip of money on ... well, everything.

A couple more links that don't directly relate, but kind of do – the prison-industrial complex wants to [exploit incarcerated folks by charging them to read by the minute](#), and the outfit that collects funds to keep internet domains organized has [just sold control over .org domains to a vulture capital company](#) and removed price caps for renewals, guaranteeing that the new "owners" of this service that is fundamental to the existence of websites can gouge .org website owners at will with virtually no outlay. These are specific problems that maybe can be reversed with enough public outrage, but ... come on, people! Really?

When there's so much going on, it's hard to decide where exactly to apply our shears to the Gordian knot, but we need to stay alert to the big, entangled picture and whack away where we can.

Subject to Change

November 13, 2019

I was talking to my partner one evening last week when my phone died, midsentence. The apple symbol flashed a few times, then the screen went dark. Plugging it in didn't help. All the usual resuscitation moves failed. I was phoneless, and it rattled me.

It's discombobulating to have your phone stop working when you're traveling. It would be disruptive at any time, really (it's embarrassing to look at the charts showing how much time I spend staring at that little screen every day) but when I was away from home, it seemed especially disorienting. I am so used to figuring out where to go using Google's map advice, finding the time I'm supposed to be somewhere by pulling up my email, keeping in touch with family by text message – even talking to people occasionally, though that's rare. It was as if half my brain stopped working.

I had a laptop with me, and Wi-Fi at the hotel, so that initial moment of panic was reduced. But I couldn't get into my email or Google documents I needed because I had to prove it was me using dual authentication, which meant I needed to click an app on my phone. To add embarrassment to injury, when I wanted to call my partner at home to explain why I had unexpectedly hung up on him, I couldn't make the hotel room phone work without assistance. (What can I say? It had so many buttons.)

It could have been worse, but it made me realize how dependent I've become on technology I didn't have just a few years ago. I used to navigate around cities through a combination of maps, a general sense of the cardinal points and asking people for directions. I put travel details down on paper. I checked in at the airport, not from my hotel room. I would talk to my family once I got home. Email could wait. But this time when my phone went dead, I felt like Robinson Crusoe. Stranded.

All of the technology we depend on is fragile. The app you use to pay for your coffee won't work if your battery has run down. The [power can be cut off](#) if the wind picks up or an ice storm hits or a squirrel gets into a transformer. Our digital systems can be held hostage with a [ransomware attack](#). A company we entrusted with our [photos](#) or our [conversations](#) can decide they aren't in that business anymore and might not provide easy options for downloading all the things you thought were yours. A piece

of your workflow may vanish because [Google thinks it's unimportant](#). A publisher can go belly up, be bought for parts or can simply update their website and break all the links to [stories you assumed would be there](#). (The Internet Archive's [Wayback Machine](#) can help, but it's not complete; I've started using [Perma.cc](#) when I want to be sure I can reliably cite an online source.)

I remember when our library catalog first went online. We kept the card catalog for a couple of years to reassure patrons, though we couldn't afford to run two parallel systems, so stopped filing cards for new books. The public catalog was retired, but we kept the shelf list just in case. In time, that went, too. Yes, the new catalog had hiccups, so we kept a paper copy of the LC classifications handy so we could guide people to the most likely place the book they wanted would be. But now that so much of every library's content is only available online, a sustained power outage would essentially shut down much of the library.

But wait! There's more (as they used to say on Veg-o-Matic ads). There are any number of [security vulnerabilities](#) that threaten the internet, so the more we rely on it, the more opportunities there are to mess with us, personally and on a geopolitical scale. The infrastructure of the internet itself takes [lots of power](#), plenty of [water to cool](#) the data centers where our stuff lives and physical equipment that will be [seriously affected by sea level rise](#). The cloud sounds so amorphous and safe, but it's built out of real stuff here on Earth.

Talk about amorphous – think about the smoke-and-mirrors ad-tech business model that powers so much of how we find information online. Not only are browsers and individuals increasingly blocking ads and trackers, there's plenty of reason to believe ads based on surveilling individuals [don't actually work](#). What happens if we have [a replay of the tech bubble that burst in 2000](#), only on a much larger scale? It would be a tad inconvenient to lose Google apps, Gmail, YouTube, Google search and Google Scholar, all of which are funded by scraping our lives to create the digital advertising that provides [83 percent of parent company Alphabet's income](#). The economy overall would take a bigger hit than it did 20 years ago: none of the tech companies that rattled the market when they failed in 2000 were on the [list](#) of the top 10 publicly traded corporations, but in 2019 three of them rely almost entirely or to a large extent on tailored digital advertising. A lot of our economy (not to mention our daily habits) rely on an advertising emperor dressed in hype so finely woven it turns out it may be stark naked after all.

As we go about our digital days, hooked on digital devices, it's something to think about. What's our plan B?

Trivial Pursuits

January 29, 2018

When I was growing up, going to a gas station involved an attendant who filled the tank and cleaned the windshield. By adulthood I was used to pumping my own gas, so when I was in Oregon a couple of years ago, it seemed odd to have to rely on someone else to do it, but that was the law. (It's changing this year; gas stations in rural counties will be allowed to offer self-service. Not every Oregonian is happy about it.) More recently I've learned how to use the self-checkout stations in my local supermarket. When I only have a couple of things to buy, it's handy, but it's giving me the weird feeling I might prefer not dealing with people if I can do it myself.

But nothing on earth would compel me to shop at an Amazon Go store in spite of [gushing publicity freely](#) supplied by media outlets. (To be fair, [some](#) were more [circumspect](#) or [skeptical](#).)

To enter the store you have to have an app activated on your phone. This also ensures you actually have a smart phone and a credit card. You can't use cash and you can't use your Snap card (what we used to call Food Stamps) because poor people, feh. There's no cashier, though an actual human is on hand to check IDs before you can purchase alcohol, at least until a machine can handle that. Some biometrics tied to public records should work, right? The transactions are all facilitated through the app and the cameras covering the ceiling, watching your every move. People stood in line to visit the store of the future – which is primarily “the future” because you don't have to stand in line to buy stuff.

I wouldn't shop there because I'm picky about privacy. I hardly ever download apps unless I'm sure they aren't collecting data they don't need, which means I have hardly any apps on my phone. I won't get one of those discount cards from my local store because I don't really want them analyzing my eating habits. I do buy things from Amazon from time to time, but I prefer not to let one company have too much information about what I wear or read or watch. (Don't even ask me about Alexa – voluntarily having an always-on microphone in my house is not happening.) I'm not crazy about replacing local stores with warehouses where the working conditions are notoriously bad, or about [replacing those jobs with robots](#). Why is this an

exciting future? Is standing in line and saying hello to a cashier so terrible that we have to [solve](#) that problem with “computer vision, sensor fusion, and deep learning”? Couldn’t we deploy all that sophistication on, I don’t know, having water that’s [safe to drink](#)?

It’s weird how we can’t begin to solve actual problems – poverty, inequality, imminent environmental catastrophe, replacing aging infrastructure, providing affordable health care – because they’re hard, but we are throwing everything we’ve got at things we don’t need like self-driving cars and cashierless convenience stores. Our greatest innovations are focused on absolute trivia because the point is a) to be the first to make something cool without people getting up in your business with regulations and stuff and b) make money. These advanced technological innovations are usually touted as “making the world a better place” although they actually have zero to do with making the world a better place.

All of that built-in surveillance can have unintended consequences. For reasons I don’t totally understand, there’s an app where you track your running and compare it with other people’s exercise. That all shows up on a map – sweet, [unless you don’t want your military bases to light up](#) in conflict zones where you’re not advertising your presence. Then fitness buffs not opting out can be a problem. Or what if you’re avoiding a stalker? Apparently if you don’t actively adjust the settings, it pinpoints who you are and where you go and makes that information public. Because sharing is so great.

It’s also weird how humans actually are involved in so many of these futures designed to replace people. Somebody has to train the machines. Mark Graham, a professor of internet geography at Oxford, [recently reported](#) on a training facility in central Africa, a day’s drive from the nearest international airport, where low-wage workers tag and match images eight hours a day to structure information that will be used by autonomous vehicles and advanced search engines – things they’ll never own and probably will never use. And let’s not forget the armies of [contract workers who get to flag the filth](#) that people upload to social networks, something machines can’t do well. We never have to look these people in the eye. They might as well not exist.

This clean, well-lighted future of ours has cameras mounted on every surface, data buried in leaky containers, and the dirty work happening in far-away places we don’t have to think about. Maybe we should.

That's Sorted

September 12, 2019

I was intrigued when I saw some coverage of [a recent article in Nature](#) (paywalled, but there's a [read-only version](#)) that coined an intriguing phrase: information gerrymandering. The six authors come from disparate fields that are not ones I particularly follow on a regular basis – biology, economics, and environmental change. But their experiment adds an intriguing wrinkle to the more information-science and sociology-of-information circles where I tend to eavesdrop.

The authors constructed an experiment in which people were recruited to play a voting game, which the researchers ran 120 times involving 2,520 participants, yielding data to analyze mathematically. The participants were assigned parties that didn't have platforms, just colors (purple and yellow) with an equal number of members. The goal of the game was to win the most votes. To win you had to convince people from the other side to join your party; if there was a deadlock, both parties would lose. As the authors put it, "a party is most effective when it influences the largest possible number of people just enough to flip their votes, without wasting influence on those who are already convinced."

Here's where things get interesting. If a willingness to compromise is unevenly distributed, those who have a lot of zealots who refuse to compromise have an edge. A pretty significant edge. However, if both sides use that strategy and avoid compromise, both sides lose.

The authors tested this by adding influencers, "zealous bots," to the game, voices that argued against compromise. Those voices had a significant effect. If you treat the kinds of social groupings we form online and in our politics as a kind of geography of like-minded bubbles, it's quite possible to seek the edges of those bubbles to carve out gerrymandered information groups with the help of zealotry (whether provided by bots or by actual people who strongly support one side and argue against having any truck with the other).

You might be thinking "yeah, that's exactly what people in that other party do." But remember, all that was at stake here wasn't reproductive rights or government regulation or the other things we tend to get excited about. It was whether purple or yellow was better. To see if this analysis played out

when the stakes were more defined, the authors ran a similar analysis on European and U.S. legislative bodies and saw a similar pattern.

The authors conclude:

our study on the voter game highlights how sensitive collective decisions are to information gerrymandering on an influence network, how easily gerrymandering can arise in realistic networks and how widespread it is in real-world networks of political discourse and legislative process. Our analysis provides a new perspective and a quantitative measure to study public discourse and collective decisions across diverse contexts.

Symmetric influence assortment allows for democratic outcomes, in which the expected vote share of a party is equal to its representation among voters; and low influence assortment allows decisions to be reached with broad consensus despite different partisan goals. A party that increases its own influence assortment relative to that of the other party by coordination, strategic use of bots or encouraging a zero-sum worldview benefits from information gerrymandering and wins a disproportionate share of the vote—that is, an undemocratic outcome. However, other parties are then incentivized to increase their own influence assortment, which leaves everyone trapped in deadlock.

Thinking about this in terms of information literacy, it seems important to bear in mind that the systems we so often use for keeping up with current events are optimized both for persuasion and for attention. Zealotry is both a way to maximize attention and to push a lot of persuasion buttons. We know from recent elections that the technology developed by Facebook and Google helps advertisers target audiences with a very fine grain. In my personal experience, it's really hard to use social media to persuade anyone who isn't already on board, and it's terribly common to not just talk past each other, but to do so in insulting, alienating ways. I'm not sure what the solution is. Even Google and Facebook are struggling to find better ways to detoxify political communication. But as we help students think about evaluating information, it may be interesting to zoom out from analyzing specific messages to seeing how messaging can be influenced at scale.

Move Fast and Forget Things

August 12, 2019

There has been concern since before the internet existed that we're [amusing ourselves to death](#), and since then that [the internet is making us shallow](#) and unable to focus on complex ideas or long-form texts.

Being plugged in constantly doesn't always feel amusing – in fact, it feels stressful and frantic to have news bombarding us constantly, to feel there's something that needs our attention right now because everyone on our news stream of choice (Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, Fox, CNN) is talking about it. In Neil Postman's day, the problem he saw was the shift from solid news on television to advertising-influenced visual entertainment. Later, Nicholas Carr worried about the ease with which we could find information in small nuggets online, rewiring our brains in ways that rewards us with small pings of dopamine and makes extended focus more difficult. Now, we seem to spend an inordinate amount of time sharing our thoughts about the trending issue of the day, and we can see what's important because the numbers are right there: how many thousands chatting right now about #BigThing. Of course, in a few days, that will be replaced by tens of thousands talking about #WowThisIsBig. And the week after that, we'll have forgotten those things because #EveryoneIsTalkingAboutThisNow.

Television ratings and the rise of the 24-7 news stream have certainly shaped how we experience news, as has the substitution of talk shows, dueling pundits and brand-name personalities for news reporting, something Postman foretold. When Carr first argued [Google was making us stupid](#), the company had recently bought DoubleClick and was only beginning to fine-tune how to capture and retain our attention, something that was reshaping the profitability of its then-recent acquisition, YouTube. Facebook had recently become available to anyone over 13 after an .edu-limited launch but hadn't yet achieved a positive cash flow. Twitter had barely come out its shell.

[Today](#), attention is definitely paid to these platforms (no pun intended, but it actually works): in a single day over four billion YouTube videos are viewed, over three billion Google searches are executed, close to half a billion Tweets are sent and Facebook boasts nearly 2.3 billion active users. All that attention is valuable. Alphabet (Google and YouTube's parent company) and Facebook

are currently ranked the fourth and fifth largest public corporations in the world by market capitalization.

Their architectures of attention and persuasion have far more influence than Postman or Carr could have imagined, and they make their money not on creating content or providing news or information. They make it by designing psychological rewards to keep us online, turning our clicks into profitable predictions to sell targeted ads. They know as well as Postman did what makes things sticky, and they use metrics to guide our attention, however [sketchy](#) those “trending” numbers are. They probably recognize the prescience of Postman’s prediction that using the strategies of advertising would have a significant effect on political discourse. It’s part of their business: they help campaigns turn political platforms into personalized persuasion. I’m not sure they really care much that such sticky discourse, channeled through YouTube, can do things like [elect a populist autocrat](#), not unless it damages their brand. It’s not just the tech companies who know how to seize attention online and on television. Our president is a master of using social media to live-caption *Fox and Friends* or turn the spotlight on himself when it suits him.

Meanwhile, the feedback loop between the ad-driven architecture of trending political topics, the response of the entertainment-news media and an easily bored and restless audience means we tend to spend a lot of time focused on #TheBigThing of the moment. Thanks to those little computers in our pockets, we’re always up to the minute on news. What we don’t always notice is that this collective attention makes us forget whatever was big last week, or last month, or last year. This *Brave New World* has little in common with the bleak, grim authoritarianism of 1984 – except for the memory holes.

Rigged Markets

August 1, 2019

I didn't watch the latest debates among the Democratic party candidates for president. We don't have CNN in our bare-bones cable package, and by all accounts it's a good thing, too. I do, however, subscribe to *The New York Times* and was dismayed to see the digital equivalent of above the fold devoted to pundits mulling over who "won."

Really?

This is no way to choose a president – running a reality TV contest to see who can respond to a provocation in a way that delivers the pithiest elevator speech about complex issues. Of course, this is hardly a novel insight – we've been doing this for far too long and as far as I can tell everyone is heartily sick of it.

But it's making me think about the "marketplace of ideas" at a time of the over-production of messages jamming our phones 24/7 and the rise of a new kind of sophisticated marketing that puts old-school propagandists to shame. I'm all for airing ideas and the freedom to make up our own minds. But is this actually a marketplace, like the farmer's market, where get to see the produce and talk to the people who grew it, when so much of what we encounter is filtered through platforms that are in the business of data-gathering and micro-targeting ads? Or when presidential candidates are given a sixty-second commercial slot to deliver a meme-worthy response to a stupidly provocative prompt because the ratings will be great?

This marketplace seems to be mostly wall-to-wall ads fighting for consumer attention, on platforms that use the techniques developed by casinos to keep us clicking away.

I'm concerned that we have allowed the answers to really complex and important questions – how we will respond to the climate crisis, how we will hold fair and democratic elections without them being corrupted by moneyed interests or foreign influence, how to protect public health when people believe vaccines are a threat to their personal freedom – into a glitzy *Survivor*-style reality show. Or (thinking of the constant barrage of messages through social media) an Amazon-style idea store where you are presented with unknown vendors without any quality assurance, invisible algorithms

personalizing what you see, and that holy grail – an unlimited amount of consumer choice.

This marketplace is largely unregulated, and any attempt to impose regulations is as doomed as trying to regulate guns. What if we decided anyone who wanted could sell pharmaceuticals without them being tested for safety or efficacy, treat patients without licenses, and sell food without any safety inspections because the market will decide? The only way this makes sense is if you believe ideas can do no harm and persuasion wasn't being engineered for profit.

There is a hubris in tech companies that is breathtaking at times. One *Wired* contributor [recently said](#) on Twitter that there must be no real value in any of the academic research on technology and society because he hadn't heard of it, and besides "what academics miss is that *not* knowing the prior literature, in certain fields, is actually a feature not a bug." It irritates him mightily that, when people like him say "we should figure out X," scholars pop up to say "we already did, why don't you take a look at this research." It's attitudes like this – a [year zero](#) belief that all previous knowledge is suspect and must be made anew – that lead to a stream of "whoops, that wasn't supposed to happen, we'll do better" after something went predictably wrong and people died.

If you're wondering why this has anything to do with libraries, I'm pondering how to help students navigate this brave new world of information we live with today and how to help them understand the value of academic inquiry. Simply telling them to stick to scholarly sources is not a solution – it does nothing to help them understand why scholarly methods have value in the world.

Another Tech is Possible

I submitted this piece to the Minneapolis [Star Tribune](#), which published it on January 29, 2019 under the headline “Freedom of information and personal data: Big Tech should take cues from public libraries” with the deck “They’ve developed a robust set of core values that strike the right balance.”

By the end of 2018, whatever faith we may have once placed in the giant technology corporations that we use daily was growing threadbare. YouTube made a show of removing Alex Jones’ breathless conspiracy theories for repeatedly violating their guidelines, but a subsequent [report](#) from Data and Society showed the platform continues to promote extremist content through its sensation-seeking algorithm. Amazon has rolled out a powerful facial recognition system, but it is flawed and biased, according to the ACLU, which [found](#) it falsely matched members of Congress with criminal mug shots. Facebook was apologetic about personal information scooped up by Cambridge Analytica and claimed it was a one-off violation of policies. Then we found out, thanks to a December New York Times [investigation](#), that Facebook has given over a hundred companies routine access to troves of users’ personal data.

Added to that, two [thorough reports](#) produced for a congressional committee last month described how Russian state actors used numerous American social platforms to deepen polarization, sow confusion and influence the presidential election. This isn’t a bug, it’s a feature. [Political persuasion](#) is treated no differently than persuading customers to purchase a pair of shoes. Abroad, these companies have accelerated the spread of rumors and hate, leading to lynchings in Mexico and Sri Lanka and even genocide in Myanmar. They move fast and break things, juggernauts without ethical or legal brakes.

So far, the solutions they offer have fallen short. As the Times recently [reported](#), Facebook employees in Menlo Park meet weekly to hash out rules to be followed by low-wage workers across the globe who struggle to apply them with only seconds to make judgments. Google tweaks its search engine when hate sites rise to the top of search results, but only after complaints surface. YouTube continues to send viewers down a rabbit hole of sensationalism because engagement is profitable for ad placement – a situation extremists are happy to exploit. The Turkish writer and sociologist

Zeynep Tufekci has said, “we’re building a dystopia just to make people click on ads.” A Pew Research survey has shown that Americans worry about the way these companies sweep up and use their personal information, but feel helpless.

We have a working model of a distributed sharing platform that has a much longer track record than Facebook or Google. It’s called the public library. Over the past century, libraries have developed a robust set of core values. Libraries defend intellectual freedom and fight censorship. They are committed to protecting privacy. They strive to honor the diverse voices in their communities. They value access to knowledge for all. They are committed to the public good. In short, they serve as proof of concept that sharing need not entail revealing every detail of your personal life to a multitude of data miners. The existence of public libraries demonstrates that we have the will to support sharing knowledge as a public good, not simply as a profit-making enterprise.

What does this mean for Facebook, Google and the rest? They have an influence and reach far beyond any library, but we’re not powerless. Some of us are shareholders; we can agitate for taking the public trust seriously. Some of us work for these companies. Increasingly, employees are flexing their muscle and demanding change. All of us are the user base, the members whose numbers matter to the bottom line; we can threaten to withdraw our attention if we feel our trust is abused. We are also voters who can encourage our state and national legislators to hold companies accountable and regulate sensibly. The time is right for legislation such as the [Data Care Act of 2018](#) introduced by U.S. Sen. Amy Klobuchar and others last month. After all, we demand safety features for cars and air travel. We require political ads on television to be clearly labeled. Why not make the information networks that have so much influence safer for democracy?

Another world is possible. In fact there’s a working model of it just down the street at your local public library.

THESE TRYING TIMES

Take Courage

September 24, 2015

I'm fascinated by the way fear is used to promote agendas, gain attention, or make us compliant when someone is trying to sell us something – a home security system, a medication or personal hygiene product, a public policy. It's one of the reasons I'm [interested in crime fiction](#). It gives narrative shape to ambient social anxieties while providing a comforting sense of release. We can enjoy the anxiety so long as we know things will be resolved in the final pages. This narrative reassurance is one of the reasons the FBI so often announces they've apprehended bad actors who were induced to make threats of violence [by paid informants](#). We need our drama, and we need our happy endings.

But when asking questions, when following one's curiosity, or when studying a subject like terrorism can become evidence to be used against you, things have gotten way out of hand.

A case in point: in the U.K., a university official, acting on [government instructions](#) to look for and intervene in the radicalization of Muslim students, discovered a student who was [reading a book](#) about counter-terrorism in the library and questioned him about his beliefs about his religion, Al Qaida, ISIS, and homosexuality. This is a student enrolled in the university's master's program in terrorism, crime, and global security. He was studying an assigned textbook. Had he been more Anglo-Saxon in appearance, it's unlikely a "member of staff" (I fervently hope it wasn't library staff) would have alerted authorities about suspicious reading activity. University and school officials complain that the directives from government are confusing and hard to apply. Beyond that administrative difficulty, this is a stupid way to address young people who might become alienated from British society. No surprise [it isn't working](#) and, some say, is actually counterproductive in the schools. In institutions of higher education, where it is now required, this blunt and alienating instrument is likely to fail, too.

We don't have any such government regulation here in the U.S. Our state interventions in the name of preventing terrorism are more subtle and hidden. We do have school officials [ready to call the police](#) when a student brings a homemade clock to school, and we have police willing to put a kid

in cuffs not because he posed a threat (the bomb squad wasn't called, no measures were taken to protect other students) but because he should know better than to bring things with wires attached to school, at least not when he looks so scary. This kind of bigotry happens to kids often, though it rarely becomes a news event.

[Fear is almost always](#) cited as a contributing factor to police shootings, including the disproportionate number of unarmed black people. Some people are now blaming the Black Lives Matter movement for police deaths on the job by playing up trends [that don't actually exist](#).

You know what might help help us solve these vexing social issues? Less fear. More education. More access to libraries and the ideas they contain. More discussion and debate. More respect for the value of exploring controversial ideas openly and of using evidence to make up our minds. A focus on preventing crime rather than preventing ideas.

[Librarians refused to be cowed](#) by a security letter and gag order that demanded access to patron records – and they won. Trustees at a public library [recently rejected fearmongering](#) by the Department of Homeland Security and voted to maintain a Tor exit relay, believing privacy is so important to intellectual freedom that they would provide it in spite of vague threats of possible bad actors.

Librarians need to take our commitment to intellectual freedom to heart and fight back when fear is used as a weapon against the right to inquire and explore. Reading must never be considered evidence of a crime. And (a critical information literacy concept) we need to be alert to the uses of fear in controlling and shaping public issues.

We Can Handle the Truth

August 11, 2016

The Society of Professional Journalists [Code of Ethics](#) starts out with a bang: Seek truth and report it.

But how do you know what is true? Where do you seek it, and what have you missed? What happens to it when you decide how to hook readers with a great lede that evokes an emotional response that colors the story a certain way, or when your editor cuts three grafts that you think are essential? What happens when your story goes viral, but you find out you overlooked something critical? How can you be sure you're reporting the truth when the high-placed source you depend on for access has his own agenda? How do you ensure your own agenda isn't sneaking into your reporting? For that matter, how will you seek the truth and report it when you became a freelancer and you can barely pay your broadband bill, much less pay the eye-watering amount a public official wants to satisfy your FOIA request?

Okay, it's not perfect. Reporting, even good reporting, is often incomplete or simply wrong. But there's still something important there. *Seek the truth. Tell it.*

This is also what scientists and scholars do in an ideal world. Sure, they may also be seeking tenure, or the next grant, or a job that will lift them out of poverty-wage academic piecework. They may be leery of simplistic truth claims and quick to challenge anyone who pronounces any truth as singularly accurate. They know how very limited our ability to find the truth is in reality.

But . . . but . . . we try. We try when we are careful about how we gather evidence and when we let evidence change our minds. We try when we explain the limits to what we have discovered, when we examine an issue with an open mind, when we don't immediately dismiss claims that run counter to our beliefs. We try when we strive to be fair, even if we believe pure objectivity is impossible. We try, knowing absolute truth will inevitably elude us.

The current unpleasantness – the most bizarre election in memory (and I'm ancient enough that my memory reaches back to the 1960 Nixon-Kennedy race) – has thrown down two challenges for those of us who still

cling to the idea that there is such a thing as truth and seeking it is worthwhile.

The first challenge is the idea that facts are those things you choose to believe. Vaccines cause autism. George W. Bush was behind the 9/11 attacks. Wealth trickles down and tax cuts for the rich create good jobs for the middle class. Humans didn't cause climate change, evolution is fake, and coal is clean energy. You can find sources that "prove" all of these things. Choose your own reality.

The second challenge is that people can avoid responsibility for [public statements](#) by simply saying "that's not what I meant" or "come on, I was kidding." Words spoken by public figures don't work that way.

All politicians lie some of the time, and they often make veiled insinuations – but Donald Trump trumps them all. This week he said his opponent wants to abolish the second amendment. That's a supposition or a conspiracy theory. [It isn't a fact](#), though he stated it as if it was. When he said "second amendment people" might be able to prevent that candidate from appointing judges if she's elected, he later claimed that he only meant that gun owners wield significant political influence. His retroactive interpretation won't change the fact that many people interpreted his statement as a suggestion that someone with a gun could rid us of that troublesome candidate and the judges she might pick. As David Cohen put it in *Rolling Stone*, those casual throw-away comments are not just "dog whistles" conveying coded meaning to those who are tuned to a particular frequency. They encourage [a particular kind of DIY terrorism](#). It doesn't matter that Trump claims that's not what he meant.

My job, a job shared by all academics who teach, involves helping students understand how information works – where it comes from, why context matters, how to make decisions when you encounter contradictions, and how to use information fairly and responsibly when trying to persuade others. That job is carried out all over campus, but at institutions that focus on undergraduate education, it's explicitly what our libraries are for. The library is a lab or studio for creating new meaning using existing knowledge. (It's also a place to study and take naps and socialize, but those are not why we build libraries.) The habits of mind that students pick up in the process are important. They're learning how to think independently of political messaging, half-baked opinion pieces, superficially-reported news, or the preponderance of opinion among their friends or family. They're learning to

respect evidence and to believe in their own capacity to discern the truth using ethical means.

What we call “information literacy” is so much more than learning how to use libraries or how to avoid bad websites. It’s learning how to read the world around you critically and clearly while also practicing the means of making that world better. You can’t do any of that if you think reality is just a matter of choice.

Remember when Governor Scott Walker [tried to remove the words “search for truth”](#) from the mission of the University of Wisconsin? He later said it was a drafting error. There are [reasons to believe that’s not true](#). Whether or not that phrase is explicit on your campus – engraved over a lintel or included in a mission statement – it seems more important than ever that we take it seriously and help students make that search their own, as quaint and naive as it may sound.

What Next?

November 9, 2016, the day after the presidential election

Will he lock her up?

Will he ban all Muslims from coming into the country until we figure out what's going on?

Will he build a wall?

Will he send the bill to Mexico?

Will he deport two million illegals?

Will he grab her by the pussy?

Will he drain the swamp?

Will he stop and frisk?

Will he sue the lying media?

Will he Tweet it?

Will he repeal Obamacare?

Will he renegotiate NAFTA?

Will he bring back good jobs?

Will he get rid of all the regulations?

Will he make Europe pay its share?

Will he bomb the hell out of ISIS?

Will he bring back waterboarding?

Will he get along with Russia?

Will he let us know, folks, what's really going on?

Will he keep us in suspense?

Will he make America great again?

Make America [Fill In the Blank]

December 20, 2016

I've been giving a lot of my Twitter feed a raised eyebrow lately. No, it's not at all likely that electors will denounce Trump and vote differently. Huh, that must-read thread seems kind of dumb. No, I don't think calling for recounts is a great idea just after we kept insisting the vote couldn't possibly be rigged.

And then there's the Russian thing. I think it's extremely likely Putin has tried to influence our election. I think it's almost certainly true that WikiLeaks collaborated in playing up emails from Democratic Party folks that contained unappetizing recipes for making political sausage. I think Putin is an appalling dictator who has journalists killed and is fleecing his country while suppressing dissent viciously. I think those uniforms his palace guard wears are tacky souvenirs of a not-so-glorious imperial past. And yes, it troubles me that our new president looks up to him.

But what really bothers me isn't what Russia did. We do it to other countries all the time, sometimes at a small scale, sometimes disastrously. We shouldn't meddle in other countries' elections, and neither should Russia. But the actual meddling was pretty minor stuff. Embarrass a candidate. Give fuel to her enemies. Get the press distracted so they don't put resources into covering more important news. None of this would have amounted to foreign influence if a large number of our citizens weren't already looking for a strong man candidate who promised he could change things back to some mythical past.

John Warner has written here about [how badly we need our institutions](#) – the ones that have been undermined deliberately. This has been going on for a long time, and it has contributed to a culture where expertise is suspect, the media is lying, the government is always suspicious, academics belong on watch lists, and once-public things like public schools and public higher education are defunded or privatized. But it's not just distrust of particular institutions. Many people simply don't believe in our system anymore. In part, it's neoliberal economic policies playing out with their scorched-earth austerity policies becoming too much for ordinary people to bear. In part, it's discomfort with an America that seems different, more diverse and more outspoken. We know fewer people who aren't like us than we did when we attended the same schools and didn't have our social connections curated

for us by advertising companies that want us to click a lot. So the election surfaced a yearning to blow stuff up and turn the clock back to make America the country of fond memory that it never really was.

At bottom, I suspect it's because many Americans aren't really that into democracy. Freedom, yes – defined as not having bossy people limit your personal right to do what you want. The idea of liberty is popular. But we're not always keen on democratic processes working in their messy way toward some collective arrangement that will benefit all of us. We're not happy when we're feeling as if we had to surrender some of our privileges because people who aren't like us raised the issue of unfairness and made us uncomfortable. We're not invested enough in our systems to even bother voting much of the time. The great winner of this latest election is “shrug,” which earned more significantly more votes than either of the major candidates.

(Though not everyone who didn't vote was in favor of shrug. In many states, Republicans have spent a lot of energy ensuring people who aren't likely to vote for them can't vote at all. There's something seriously bankrupt about a party that wants to reduce the number of people who are allowed to vote as a winning strategy.)

It's cold comfort, but I sometimes tell myself we'll get through this moment of peril because we have before, and (just barely) in my lifetime. We tend to think of McCarthyism as an aberration, a strange era when a bully used his pulpit to do un-American things, but a 1954 Gallup poll found half of Americans sided with Joe. Only a minority opposed him, and the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court speculated that if the Bill of Rights were put to a vote, it would be defeated.

Then, just a decade later, we passed the Civil Rights Act.

So I waver between despair and hope. Hope, because we have overcome moments in our history that we look back on with dismay. Despair because our history is so full of those moments. Maybe we really aren't better than this. Or maybe we could be, again, at least until then next time.

The Media Has Always Been the Opposition Party

January 28, 2017

Steve Bannon, through his proxy, President Trump, has declared war on the press repeatedly. Recently [he said](#) the media, not the Democratic Party, is the opposition. That was a little chilling, but not as chilling as what he said next: the press should keep its mouth shut.

Freedom of the press is just one of the elements of the first amendment that this administration holds in contempt, but it's an important one.

Bannon and his proxy president are un-American, but hardly original. Historically, a lot of Americans have been un-American. The day the president [signed an order](#) that turned Iraqi translator-refugees who assisted the U.S. military into refugees from our country also happened to be a day of remembrance of the Holocaust. A Twitter account reminded us quite powerfully that we turned people away when they sought refuge from fascist Germany, leading [directly to their murder in Hitler's camps](#).

Likewise, a lot of policies put in place by previous administrations are tools ready for Trump to use and they are pretty well worn. As outrageous as Trump's executive order that stranded legal American residents at airports may seem, tens of thousands of undocumented immigrants have been languishing in detention. Human Rights Watch [issued a report](#) last year on medical neglect leading to death in these facilities, and it [wasn't the first](#) such report.

This is not an argument for letting down our guard, it's simply a reminder that the new fascism is built on a pretty sturdy foundation that has been constructed over many years. We need to take our history into account as we calculate how much pressure it will take to influence the arc of the moral universe.

But let's also remember that a free press is absolutely necessary to a free nation. That's the reason opposition is in the job description. Journalists are supposed to hold the powerful accountable. As I've [said before](#), they often fail, but that doesn't obviate the need for a free press – now and always.

The [Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press](#) keeps an eye on the state of our freedom and offers resources for threatened journalists. The

[Committee to Protect Journalists](#) tracks attacks on reporters worldwide. Since 1992, 1,228 journalists have been killed on the job, 56 of them in Russia where the leader Trump admires so much does not tolerate a free press. In the past year, there have been mass arrests in Turkey of both journalists and academics. When it comes to tyrants, reporters are in the cross-hairs because the powerful don't want to be held accountable.

It doesn't matter who is in the White House. We need a strong and free press. Long live the opposition

Matter of Facts

February 19, 2017

Remember “[truthiness](#)”? Stephen Colbert, in his parodic role of a brash conservative talk show personality, coined it in 2005 and it seemed to nail a fact of political life: politicians often said things that seemed true, that felt true, that appealed to an audience as true while sliding off to one side of demonstrable facts. He was giving a name to the political polarization that made Americans line up behind different sets of known “facts” along with a tendency to prefer assertions that carried an emotional charge.

“Truthiness,” named the [2005 Word of the Year](#) by the American Dialect Society, has given way to the Oxford Dictionaries [2016 Word of the Year](#), “Post-Truth,” which was a bit depressing until it was eclipsed by the furor over “fake news.” That last shape-shifting phrase means all kinds of things, including any news you don’t like. Entire news organizations have been labeled “fake news” by our president.

One of the odd things about this moment is the way that a president who lies frequently and without any shame (as when [inventing terrorist events in Sweden](#) while ignoring attacks in [Quebec](#), [Pakistan](#), and [Iraq](#) – and for that matter an [actual terrorist attack](#) in Sweden last month when Neo-Nazis bombed a refugee center in Gothenberg – that don’t play into his clash-of-civilizations narrative) is loved for appearing honest compared to the rehearsed and polished surface of most politicians. The man who poses on gilded furniture and brags about how much it costs to join his exclusive resort is praised for being a man of the people, unlike Washington insiders who work for the people but are despised for being elites. Expertise itself is rejected as elitist, but paying \$200,000 to join a golf club owned by the president is not.

There are other odd things about this moment: Democrats suddenly believing everything an unnamed CIA or NSA source says to a reporter, for example, or being a little too quick to toss [charges of treason](#) around. But we need to resist becoming indifferent to a barrage of falsehoods.

Cultural institutions made a small gesture toward this last Friday with [#DayofFacts](#), when around 280 museums and libraries shared facts and pointed toward resources for learning more. My library participated. It’s kind of sad that we have to take a stand for facts, but here we are.

Facts, of course, are not enough. After all, comment threads are full of demands for more facts and random facts wielded as ammunition. What's really at stake is whether we care about truth and whether we think there are commonly agreed-upon ways to approach it. [A recent essay](#) in *History Today* by David Wooten gives some valuable reminders of how we began to trust the idea of facts as a dispassionate challenge to authority. He concludes that the traditions we have used since the Enlightenment are being undermined by a new appeal to authority pitched against “standards of reliability and evidence” that are the infrastructure for the rule of law.

I'm not sure that's it, exactly. There is wide resentment that has developed for years, cleverly channeled by Trump, that experts have let us down, that politicians are not honest, that it's time to destroy the institutions that didn't preserve good jobs and prosperity for those who grew up expecting them. For some, lying as boldly as Donald Trump does is a refreshing cure for the status quo. It's an acknowledgment that something is very wrong, and as a bonus it comes with whole populations who can be blamed.

After the #DayofFacts I'm pondering just how academics and cultural institutions can do more to clarify that these standards of reliability and evidence aren't just a point of difference or an elitist insult, but can be actually useful to all of us as we figure out how to make things better.

Info Wars

May 16, 2017

Information is power, the old saw goes, but withholding information is powerful, too. It's kind of disturbing to see how information is hidden in weird political shell games. Remember when [people rushed](#) to save public environmental data sets fearing they would disappear? Information about climate change that has been available at the EPA's website since 1997 has been [mothballed](#) and replaced by news that it's being updated, though that message has been there for weeks and it's not clear what alternative facts will take its place. While the administration's hand was forced and the previously-collected data was retained in an archived site, Trump's proposed [budget would ensure](#) we know even less about the quality of our water and air or how the climate is changing. If we don't have the facts, it's harder to blame the industries that want a freer hand and [fewer regulations](#) to rein in their actions.

We're good at concealing who actually benefits from government spending. Matthew Desmond's [recent article](#) in the *New York Times Magazine* spells out how much upper-income homeowners are subsidized thanks to tax policy and how desperately inadequate our funds for housing assistance are – funds that the Trump budget would cut even further. (Currently three quarters of those eligible for housing assistance don't get it and the wait lists for assistance can be years long or simply full up.) When Mitt Romney said 47 percent of the population were takers, he was generally correct – but he was wrong about who was in that category. When it comes to housing, it's middle and upper class homeowners who benefit, and the impact resonates through generations. Desmond writes “It is difficult to think of another social policy that more successfully multiplies America's inequality in such a sweeping fashion.” He points out that for less than one percent of the tax subsidy homeowners get we could end family homelessness in this country, but it's a political non-starter. We don't tend to see these enormous subsidies to homeowners because they're in the tax code, not a line in the federal budget that can be easily axed.

The new target for pound foolishness is [the 2020 census](#). We benefit immeasurably from the public data collected and shared by the U.S. Census. Businesses rely on it. Innovation depends on it. Redistricting also depends

on demographic information collected by the Census. Congress thinks we should cut back on expenses – and on solid information for the public good.

There aren't many people with the knowledge and managerial skills to run the decennial census, and one of those few [just resigned](#), fed up with the political bickering over funding the 2020 census. We're not the only country to court census controversy. Australia was [slammed by privacy advocates](#) for wanting to retain name-level specificity for up to four years, then had its site for collecting information [taken down](#) by distributed denial of service attacks. Canada's ultraconservative PM Stephen Harper [made the Canadian census voluntary](#), which meant important data for understanding society was lost. Though these moves are often made under the color of reducing spending, the reduction of information also benefits those who want to spend less on social programs. If we don't know who's in need, we can pretend that need doesn't exist.

Funding [a proper census](#) would be a bargain compared to the public benefit it offers. I suspect most of the members of Congress opposed to providing the Census Bureau with adequate funding are happy to fund the NSA's mass surveillance programs. (Rand Paul is the only exception I can think of.) Maybe if we were able to tax a tiny portion of those funds and transfer it to the Census we could know more about who we are and would be better positioned to act on that knowledge. But using public knowledge to inform action isn't this administration's strong suit.

How Not To Fight Terrorism

June 5, 2017

I suppose it's inevitable, given that information-driven tech-centered global corporations dominate the list of Big Rich Companies, that information systems play a significant role in 21st century terrorism. ISIS has famously [made effective use](#) of social media platforms for recruitment purposes. So have [white nationalists and neo-Nazis](#). The responses have been [fumbling](#), partly because the job of moderating messages that globally flow by the billions is difficult and partly because that flow is the current that produces power and money for these companies. Our devices and platforms want to seize and retain our attention and categorize our passions; building in methods to check the flow adds cost and conflicts with their very design. So that's one thing: our most powerful information channels today are unprecedented in their usefulness for creating global connections among people who seek people who feel the same anger – and in their design-driven capacity for fanning those flames.

Then there's the news media, which has always been prone to hyping stories about violence because they get our attention. "If it bleeds, it leads" is an old saying, but now the news media are dependent on advertising intermediaries who have captured most of the attention market and the ad dollars that media rely on. In reality, nearly all of the violence in our country goes uncovered, because it's Tuesday; what's new? But a terrorist act committed here or abroad will get [non-stop coverage](#) even when the only "news" available is a few cell phone clips played over and over with vacuous commentary. This propensity to play up danger does nothing to help us understand why these things happen, but it promises disaffected and angry young men the chance to be on television, action heroes displaying the rage they feel, people who suddenly are seen as belonging to something big. It's trite to say "that's how the terrorists win," but . . . that's how the terrorists win.

Third, there are governments that use these events to bolster their power. It's not safe when states [hoard vulnerabilities](#) so they can exploit them. It's not safe to [break encryption](#). The trouble with creating back doors for the government is that other people will use them, and we are so incredibly dependent on encryption for basic things, not just texting each other or

shopping online. We need encryption for securing global financial transactions, keeping medical records, running the electrical grid, and on and on. Demands to give the keys to governments in the name of security endanger our security.

Collecting it all has brought other problems. In the UK, as in the US, money has been poured into building a massive surveillance state. New laws continually expanded the power of the state to monitor British citizens (though the courts are [pushing back](#)). Yet in the two most recent attacks, collecting it all didn't help. It probably hurt. Citizens [tried to report suspicions](#) they had about the perpetrators, but couldn't get anyone's attention. When everyone's a potential target, it's hard to find [the needle in the haystack](#), and building bigger haystacks with artificial intelligence-driven needle detectors isn't working. Following up on tips is everyday policing, but budget cuts to social programs include [reductions in the number of police](#) who can respond to their communities.

And while we're talking about information systems, there's also the new ways we get statements from the White House.



Real Press Sec. @RealPressSecBot · 8h



A statement by the President:

THE WHITE HOUSE
Office of the Press Secretary

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
June 5, 2017

Statement by the President

Pathetic excuse by London Mayor Sadiq Khan who had to think fast on his "no reason to be alarmed" statement. MSM is working hard to sell it!

###



Real Press Sec. @RealPressSecBot · 11h



A statement by the President:

THE WHITE HOUSE
Office of the Press Secretary

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
June 5, 2017

Statement by the President

People, the lawyers and the courts can call it whatever they want, but I am calling it what we need and what it is, a TRAVEL BAN!

###



Real Press Sec. @RealPressSecBot · Jun 4



A statement by the President:

THE WHITE HOUSE
Office of the Press Secretary

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
June 4, 2017

Statement by the President

At least 7 dead and 48 wounded in terror attack and Mayor of London says there is "no reason to be alarmed!"

###

Russel Neiss created [a clever bot](#) to put the president's statements in the form of presidential statements. It may look amusing, but it's not a joke. The president is the president, and what he says in public is an official statement, not some private citizen's late-night Tweets. It can be frustrating to see press time given to trivial and silly remarks, but it's even more frustrating to see our president engage in trolling as his primary public form of foreign and domestic policy. I'm not sure it's fair to blame this bizarre situation on social media, but clearly the combination of widespread anger, increasingly polarized news consumption, and the attention-addiction design of powerful social media platforms (quite apart from the detailed [digital profiles](#) being used to get people to the polls and the [digital mischief](#) being used to confuse us on our way there) has made it difficult to discourage the president from

insulting our allies and . . . well, making statements that help the terrorists win.

So what to do? Hold Facebook, Google, Twitter et al accountable. Stop feeding the dreams of terrorists by making them stars in television action dramas. Hide the president's phone? I admit, there aren't easy answers, but what a toxic information brew we've created. We're going to have to figure this out, and soon.

Beyond Ignorance

August 17, 2017

With the school year starting soon, I've been thinking about how we might approach information literacy this year (because every year is a new opportunity to figure out a better way) and I've also been thinking about Charlottesville and how librarians should respond to this moment.

David Lankes, director of the University of South Carolina's School of Library and Information Science, has been thinking about it, too. His hot-off-the-press [blog post on this issue](#) following the violence argues that racism is a form of ignorance and libraries, as platforms for learning, must commit themselves to fighting that ignorance in the library and throughout our communities. "Don't think that open doors are sufficient to be sanctuaries: actively engage and invite in people of all classes, and races, and creeds . . . This is not about ideology or political party, this is about our mission: to improve society through facilitating knowledge creation in our communities. Racism is antithetical to this mission. Period."

I wish it were that simple. Racism isn't always a form of ignorance, it's often a thoroughly-researched choice. We have seen a wild flourishing of knowledge creation through a multitude of new channels, and all of the impassioned players assume their goal is to improve society. What an improved society looks like and who gets to decide – that's where differences surface. The word "racism" itself has been turned inside-out to denote that which threatens the dominance of whites in American society.

So the question is how to we talk together when the words we use mean different things and our concepts of American history, our understanding of present society, and our values are in conflict?

We have always taken solace in the notion that, with enough information, people will make rational decisions, and if some don't – well, there's always persuasion through rational debate. Thomas Jefferson said in his [first inaugural address](#) opponents of our form of government could serve as "monuments to the safety with which error of opinion may be tolerated as long as reason is left free to combat." That notion that rational discourse would lead us toward enlightenment was echoed by John Perry Barlow's [Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace](#): "We believe that from

ethics, enlightened self-interest, and the commonweal, our governance will emerge.” Both believed debates rested on common principles and the assumption that the goal was harmony and good will.

Most people, to go by the number of [vigils](#) held Sunday and Monday night, are inclined toward those goals, just as most people involved in a natural disaster respond with extraordinary acts of selflessness. I’m not convinced this comes from being informed or from the exercise of reason or from enlightened self-interest. It comes from caring about other people and an impulse to help one another.

When the white supremacist mob gathered in Charlottesville, with their swastikas and torches and perfectly legal firearms, they stood for something very different. There is no reasoned debate with hate as it summons pyres of facts and figures to its cause. There is no knowledge that will cure people who boldly declare it invalid. There are no commonly-held principles to bring us together.

So what’s a library to do? I think we must admit that we have a bias toward a certain kind of reasoning. That we not only want libraries to be places where knowledge is made but that we hold certain truths to be self-evident, if hard to live up to. That we stand for both intellectual freedom and against bigotry and hate, which means some freedoms are not countenanced. That when we say “everyone is welcome here” it also means “we’ll fight those who insist not everyone ought to be.” That we don’t have all the answers, but some answers are wrong. That we must be brave enough to know our own history and recognize the ignorance we’re trying to overcome ourselves. That if we embrace fundamental values, we cannot be neutral. That reason isn’t enough. That caring for one another matters, too.

Somehow, along with traditional learning goals like recognizing the role well-reasoned evidence plays in making an argument and the more practical bits like how to use the printers and where the bathrooms are, it seems important to convey these values to our students and invite them to value both reason and care.

The Things We Forget

September 27, 2017

We've been watching [the new documentary series on the Vietnam War](#), which is excellent but also exhausting and upsetting and full of sparks of memory: Oh, that guy! I remember him. Wait, this thing is about to happen. Look how skinny those soldiers are, carrying all that equipment, just like those guys we knew. It also fills in gaps in memory. I never knew much about the Vietnamese experience. I didn't realize how many Americans were opposed to the anti-war movement, even after the Kent State killings. A poll at the time found over half of Americans thought the dead students had it coming. I suppose that included the two students shot dead at Jackson State University eleven days later, though they didn't get as much attention.

I grew up in Madison, Wisconsin, but moved to Kentucky in 1969 just as I was entering high school. I was an introvert who was discovering a whole range of ideas I'd never encountered. I was taken aback to meet students who proudly declared they didn't believe in evolution. I had no idea it was still up for debate. I also learned quickly that, though I was from enlightened Wisconsin, I didn't know a damn thing about race.

I knew the war divided us. Even in lefty Madison, there was a lot of resentment of college students demonstrating against the war. The nuns at my Catholic school who taught me about evolution also told me the war was about defending Catholics from communists while my older siblings were dodging tear gas canisters and telling me the war was not about Catholics or communism. There was a fair amount of violence, with windows regularly broken on State Street and tear gas and fighting with police. (This was before the awful Sterling Hall bombing but after the police chief bought a tank, a rare piece of city equipment in those days.) At the University of Kentucky, where my dad took up his new job, the protests seemed muted and tentative, but they were there. A day or two after Kent State I screwed up my nerve to make a poster about Kent State and brought a roll of black crepe-paper to my high school to make armbands for students. I went home with a lot of crepe paper. The kids mostly thought the dead college students had it coming. I'd forgotten all that.

The Kent State I "remember" is that iconic photo of a woman with her arms raised, her mouth open, horrified and heart-broken over the body of a

student who lies face down, like a child tucked in for bed. That photo became the moment, and for me that visual memory was joined by the vague idea that scared kids with guns loaded with live ammo by some extraordinary error made a terrible mistake, a mistake that cost lives and must have been instantly repented. What I didn't remember is that those armed soldiers were prepared to shoot again if the students didn't disperse. That they would have killed more students if an anguished professor hadn't begged the confused and angry students to leave. If his voice hadn't carried, if they'd decided not to listen.

Sometimes it feels as if we are doomed to replay our past on a loop, but we've forgotten so we think it's all new. We don't know how we got here or where it might end or how we could do it differently. Cheering Nazis filled Madison Square Garden in 1936. The civil rights movement fought so hard for victories that are celebrated with a few cherry-picked quotes from Martin Luther King and a few black and white photos. Where did all that anger come from at Ferguson? We've forgotten, so goodbye voting rights, hello segregated schools and racist policing.

I don't know how historians don't lose their minds, knowing all this and knowing we won't remember.

I'd forgotten just how divided we were over the war, over the direction of the country, over who we believed we were. I'd forgotten the hopeful excitement of seeing millions march together in peaceful protest at the Moratorium. I'd forgotten how furious people were at the press when they reported atrocities and government cover-ups. I'd forgotten how we lived side-by-side in completely different versions of America, and how we felt about being lied to by our presidents, and how normal that began to seem. It's coming back to me, in bits and pieces. And it's so terrible and sad and pointless and preventable. And all too easily forgotten.

Outrage and Circuses

October 5, 2017

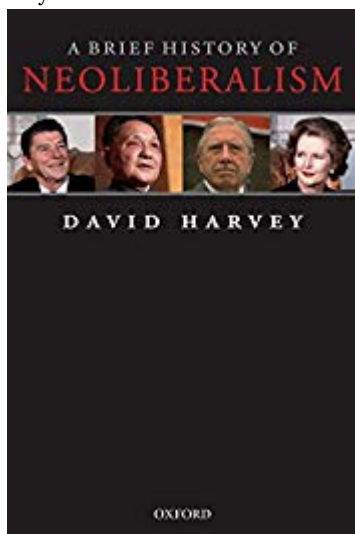
I've been trying to scale Mount To Be Read on my bedside table to balance my diet of breaking news, most of it catastrophic and dramatic. (A tip for those who face a similar struggle: I deleted Twitter from my phone, and it's astonishing how much time that has added for reading longer form texts – and how much it has helped me relax at night.) Today I realized how much the two books I most recently finished have helped me make sense of the news – not the events themselves, but the ways they are covered by the media and the ways they are circulated and amplified on social media.

First there was the catastrophe of Hurricane Maria, hard on the heels of Texas and Florida being hit. It's a hard story for journalists to cover. Getting around is difficult, and grasping the daily lived experience of nearly four million American citizens living in Puerto Rico and the US Virgin Islands who can't participate in federal elections and are frequently forgotten makes it even harder because there's not a general public knowledge base to build on. You have to start with "yes, these are Americans."

(While I haven't heard this point made in news broadcasts, it seems important that Puerto Rico and the US Virgin Islands have a larger population than 21 of our states and more than the population of Wyoming, Vermont, Alaska, North Dakota, and South Dakota added together. Imagine if Puerto Rico and the US Virgin Islands had 10 senators. Or if the District of Columbia, which has a higher population than either Wyoming or Vermont, had two. No wonder we forget these people are Americans – they're literally disenfranchised, and they are mostly not what we consider white folks: "Hispanics" can be white or black according to the way we conduct our census, but we mostly think of them as not white.)

That's all background that is not well known but hard to fit into a broadcast news segment. You also have to work pretty hard to get the visuals broadcast news depends on if the roads are blocked and the airports are struggling to land planes. On top of that, broadcasters don't have the wealth of social media imagery to draw on. Most of the cell towers were knocked out and power remains off for most of the residents and will be out for months to come. The more journalism relies on social media streams, the more likely whole parts of the planet will vanish from our awareness. The only thing that

seems to keep it at the forefront is the non-stop coverage of the president's tweets attacking the mayor of San Juan and Puerto Rico for being poor and in debt. His pals on Wall Street are not too happy with him for casually saying we should erase that debt – something that actually makes sense, but dollars carry more weight and financial institutions have a huge impact on public policy.



If you're wondering how government got so caught up in the well-being of Wall Street, I have a book for you: [A Brief History of Neoliberalism](#) by David Harvey. I had a basic understanding of what neoliberalism is, and have sometimes winced at how liberally it's sprinkled about as the root of most evil. But it's a fundamentally powerful influence on our economic and political life as well as our everyday experience, and I'm grateful to the author for helping me understand how we got here – and how market behavior isn't a fundamental law of the universe but an influential part of our recent intellectual history. In the 1970s, businesses and financial institutions began to organize themselves to fight for their interests. They did so through making existing organizations like the US Chamber of Commerce more powerfully political in furthering their mission. Even the Nobel Committee got into the act, recognizing American economists who have put their stamp our world through their talismanic belief in the wisdom of markets. (Though we tend to see Sweden as a socialist worker's paradise, Sweden has a traditionally powerful wealthy class that wields influence in high places and wanted to dethrone post-Keynesianism.) They built entire financial industries and financialized existing industries

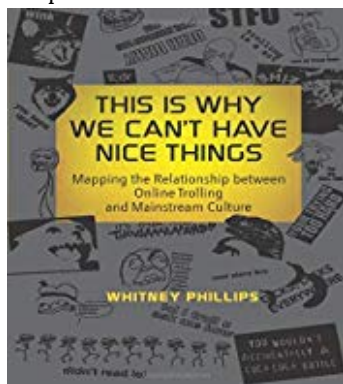
that capitalized on distrust of government and America's traditional reverence toward individual rights. They were able to refashion the state's purpose: rather than provide social welfare programs, it should create healthy conditions for businesses to thrive, which should in turn would trickle down to benefit society, though that's proven less reliable than the trickles of springs that people in Puerto Rico rely on for drinking water right now. So many of our current debates – health care, infrastructure, environmental protection, creating jobs that pay enough to live on – were illuminated for me by this accessible and informative book.

Contrast coverage of Hurricane Maria's devastation to our latest record-setting mass murder. The coverage is non-stop, with constant questions about how high-capacity high-powered weapons work and what made one man with so much firepower decide to kill so many people. It's enough to make any number of well-armed and angry hyper-masculine men think they could be famous, too. Fame is a motive, and our media response (and audience craving for sensation and sentimentality) feeds it. It's much easier to get film of what happened in Las Vegas than in Puerto Rico and the US Virgin Islands: We have video of the event taken from numerous phones. We have reconstructions of the shooter's hotel room. We also have free-lance profilers speculating about the killer's mind, which is something our true crime genres continually invite us to enter as a form of ghoulish entertainment. We have affirming stories of people behaving heroically.

(And because we can't talk about controlling guns because policy talk interferes with our immediate focus on the killing and the killed, we have an inheritor of the nuclear attack drills I grew up with. Schoolkids are being drilled on how to respond to an "active shooter event." This is the new normal that makes no more sense than mutually-assured destruction as an anxious simulacrum for peace.)

The Las Vegas murders not only have true crime phone-cinema verité, it has the [usual outbreak of gossip and disinformation](#). Isis immediately [claimed responsibility](#) because – why not? It fits their social media strategy beautifully and at zero cost. 4channers started investigating, and claims about a 4chaner's ex leaked into mainstream social media, topping the news, algorithmically evading correction because popularity and currency trumps accuracy, which is harder to measure. For hours after police identified the killer, an innocent man's name appeared as the shooter in Google results, on Twitter, and on Facebook's "safety check" page. These systems, which are now a major part of our news infrastructure, was

designed to sensationalize everything to gather information about people and push ads. Their only ethics are the bottom line, and the mitigation of harm is more about protecting the brand than the public good. Gossip and lies move faster and further than journalism and judgement and they're far more profitable.



Another book languishing on my “to be read” list for too long explained a lot of this to me. Whitney Phillips’ [This is Why We Can’t Have Nice Things: Mapping the Relationship Between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture](#) reports on years of being embedded in the spaces where troll culture developed and thrived. Now appropriation seems to be making old trolls nostalgic about the past, before memes went mainstream and the the outrage market online became dominated by Infowars and Breitbart, pushing their tasteless pranks out of the spotlight. What’s revealing about hanging out with trolls (as Gabriella Coleman did for [another study with a different focus](#)) is that they thrived on the same sensationalism and shock that is increasingly the modus operandi for cable news and social media clicks. Those cute Advice Dog memes? They came from 4chan trolls. That sense of outrage that drives so many of us to spend too many hours with our closest online pals criticizing others? That’s the same desire to bond over poking others with sharp sticks that animated troll culture. The trolls’ vicious attacks on women and political correctness and their imperial sense of permission to do whatever they want? That’s part of traditional American culture. There are two intriguing points Phillips makes that I’ll try to summarize in two quotes:

“Trolls certainly amplify the ugly side of mainstream behavior, but they aren’t pulling their materials, chosen targets, or impulses from the ether. They are born of and fueled by the mainstream world – its behavioral mores, its corporate institutions, its political structures and leaders – however

much the mainstream might rankle at the suggestion.” And “trollish play with tragedy is what happens when current events become *content*, a term frequently (and cynically) used in the blogosphere to describe the various bits of digital stuff that may be shared, remixed, and of course monetized through advertisements . . . trolls embody and in fact are grimacing poster children for the more ambivalent aspects of socially mediated web culture, namely objectification, selective attachment, and pervasive self-involvement.”

Regardless of whether we cross paths with trolls, our media environment has been shaped by the same impulses and by the same affordances of value measurement by clicks and shares, just as our responses to disasters is shaped by an economic policy framework that has changed our relationship with our governments and with one another as citizens. I’m glad I read these two books. Not only do they explain a lot, reading a chapter or two at night instead of streams of breaking news and heated opinion is helping me break bad habits.

At Year's End

December 20, 2017

I browsed through my blog posts to inspire a wrap-up. A lot about social media, fake news, and net neutrality. Some thoughts about libraries and their place in democracy and in higher education. A few book reviews, a few thoughts about scholarly publishing. In other words, yammering about the same things as when I first started blogging here in 2010.

This surprised me. It hasn't been a normal year. I called my senators and congressman more in its first few weeks than I had in my entire life. I sent emails and signed petitions. I marched. I despaired. I raged. I felt that sense of sudden unreality over and over when hearing the name of gaudy hotel chain prefaced by "President." I'm growing numb, though every day seems to bring a new insult to our collective dignity, a new crisis, a new fracture in our society that seems irreparable.

Yet our lives go on. Congress probably will [reauthorize section 702](#) of the PATRIOT Act so the mass surveillance that Edward Snowden unveiled can continue. Facebook, Google, and Twitter will continue to gormlessly promote lies and polarization to [sell ads](#). The term paper still doesn't work, but we'll keep assigning it. Big publishing will behave badly and profitably, and good books will keep making it to the market and into my hands. Right now we're busy marking papers and grading tests. We're thinking about the syllabus for spring, even if we won't write it until after the new year. We're fixing broken links and putting dinner on the table and taking the dog to the vet. Those months of unreality have become so routine they are our new reality. But not a new normal.

We can still be surprised. We saw the phrase "climate change" [deleted](#) from government websites, but hearing that [CDC officials were told](#) to avoid touchy phrases like "fetus," "vulnerable," and "science-based" in budget documents was still a shock. Really? Has it come to this? It already had. It seemed pretty weird that among the millions of comments submitted to the FCC on net neutrality some [two million were fakes](#), using stolen credentials. That makes it seem slightly less shocking that the department of Health and Human Services is [simply deleting](#) ones it doesn't like. It seemed stupid to keep attacking a health care bill that became popular once people saw the Republican alternative, but that was just a harbinger. Pleasing donors and

placating the president matters more than what the American people want, and so we have a tax bill that includes huge benefits for the ruling class, drilling on arctic lands, and an improvised explosive device that will try to destroy the health care program that was too popular to replace. Next, they'll move on Medicare and Social Security, which I think I heard Paul Ryan call "welfare reform" this morning.

Yet life goes on. The people brought in to dismantle the agencies they lead are finding they are made of sturdy stuff. Committed public servants, those that are left, continue to do their work, defending the constitution against all enemies foreign and domestic, doing their jobs in spite of it all.

This has been a strange year, but also one that didn't come out of nowhere. As baffled as we were at first by Trump, he's simply the once and future king of insecurities and hatreds that have a long history in this country. The populist revolt has been placated by race-baiting rallies and [a retro motto](#) of champagne wishes and caviar dreams. A glamorous black-gloved hand [clutches](#) a sheet of freshly-printed currency. Whiteness has been restored to the White House. Hate crimes are up, but only because the hate that was always there has been let off the leash. We're on the brink of nuclear war (my childhood nemesis) while still fighting one that is only slightly younger than the millennium. We neglected to fund a critical health program for children as we found the time to cut off foreign aid and access to birth control in the name of life. But then, we've allowed a fifth or more of our children to live in poverty for decades. We fought off some stupid provisions in the tax bill that would have made graduate training impossible, but that's a small triumph in a higher ed system that for years has been treating faculty as bit players in a gig economy.

We have a lot of work to do – the everyday work that has to go on and the longer-term work of addressing the problems that got us to this moment in our history. I wish us all a better new year.

Winner Take All (But the Blame)

March 18, 2018

As hard as it is to be shocked by anything anymore, the deeply reported story about how a politically-motivated marketing company used personal data of over fifty million unwitting people gathered through a Facebook app, collecting psychological profiles to merge with vast amounts of personal data is still pretty astonishing. Kudos to [The New York Times](#) and the Guardian's [Observer](#) for their work.

At the same time, it's no surprise at all. We've long known Cambridge Analytica was given lots of money by Robert Mercer, a far-right libertarian who teamed up with Steve Bannon then of Breitbart, to elect a president who would serve their political aims. We've known for almost as long as it has existed that Facebook gathers enormous amounts of personal data using emotional triggers, technology, obscure privacy policy shifts, and an enormous user base to become one of the world's most powerful influence machines. We didn't know much about the academic, Aleksandr Kogan, who wrote the app to get the data from Facebook in a way that violated their terms, but we knew from Cambridge Analytica's marketing hype that they intended to gather data on virtually every American adult and match it with psycho-social profiles to effectively target political messages.

What's still shocking, though, is the brazen disregard for common decency exhibited by all the players. Maybe it's wrong to call it "common," because generally accepted norms of behavior are no longer generally accepted. That's pretty much a definition of "polarization."

Cambridge Analytica is shocked, shocked to learn that the research they paid for was gathered in ways that Facebook didn't technically allow but didn't bother to check. Facebook, is shocked, shocked, that someone who said they would agree to terms by ticking a box on a form would fail to keep that agreement because, as a Facebook spokesman told the Times, "protecting people's information is at the heart of everything we do." How he said that with a straight face is beyond me. Kogan has said he did nothing wrong, though one of his employers, [Cambridge University](#), might find his methods unethical even though Kogan performed this work under the auspices of a private company. (I literally guffawed when I read at his

university profile that his lab is “highly interested in cooperation [and] trust” among other positive-sounding things.) I have no idea whether his other academic affiliation, St. Petersburg State University, considers his private business interests problematic. Evidently Cambridge was unaware of this side gig.

The joint investigative work of the Times and the Observer confirms some other unsavory things: the data that Cambridge Analytica said was destroyed hasn’t been; when a lawyer informed Mercer and Bannon foreigners couldn’t work on US political campaigns they set up an elaborate shell company to America-wash it all; the mechanism for influencing voters was tested first in Caribbean and African campaigns where privacy regulations aren’t such a bother. Facebook is outraged now, but only because the story was about to go public – as if their whole business doesn’t revolve around using personal data to manipulate people. There’s plenty that stinks about this.

What bothers me most, though, is that none of these parties has any sense of responsibility for the things they admit went wrong. It’s somebody else’s fault. Nobody seems to see these as their ethical breaches or breaches of trust. Just mistakes in the paperwork and bad PR.

Another analysis in the *Sunday Times* explains some of this attitude. A sizable portion of Americans believe in the absolute truth of their religion, in the absolute greatness of the United States, and an absolute devotion to individualism, including unregulated capitalism. It doesn’t matter if something is factually correct. It doesn’t matter when Trump publicly admits he made up information during an official visit from a head of state. (Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said the United States didn’t have a trade deficit with Canada, and Trump told supporters at a fund-raiser “I didn’t even know. I just said ‘you’re wrong.’” Lying comes easy when you have no sense of shame.) According to [Peter Baker’s “Washington Memo,”](#) taking issue with facts is just political nit-picking to a segment of the population that adheres to a “deeper truth” that Trump represents for them more faithfully than the news media or any other secular institution. Winning matters, how you win is unimportant.

An academic doesn’t care a fig about research ethics. A wealthy man spends millions to manipulate millions to elect the leader he has chosen for us because he doesn’t want to leave that up to our democratic process. A company that manipulates billions of people around the globe to sell ads keeps pretending they have no responsibility for the damage it is doing and has no answers when asked how they plan to fix it. And we, the public, are [all](#)

[too happy to share sensational information](#) without checking its accuracy or context. What a strange hole we've dug ourselves.

It's not exactly news, but still it's solid journalism. It's not exactly a surprise, but it should be shocking if we have any sense of decency.

Can't Argue With That

August 12, 2018

It seems as if Charlottesville was several years ago. It was a shock, seeing Nazis and white supremacists carrying torches on the campus of the University of Virginia campus, then invading the town carrying guns and the kind of gear that you'd think belonged to an angry offshoot of the Society for Creative Anachronism, unleashing threats, violence, beatings, and even murder. There was outrage, but since then there has been a strange drift toward accepting white supremacy. It's fueling [candidates for office](#). It shows up on talk shows where hosts say America won't be America if we don't get rid of immigrants.

This is nothing new. What's new, I think, is the way in which social media and journalism are trying to negotiate new forms of expression and argument in the midst of the vast and immediate distribution of text, images, and video through new channels. I'm trying to figure out how to help students understand the information they encounter, and our usual discussions of evaluation of sources simply doesn't apply without a broader grasp of the sociotechnical moment we're in. Understanding events like Charlottesville and the hate-inspired violence that keeps happening is likewise impossible without understanding the ways information outside the library flows.

In [a Twitter thread](#) the SF writer John Scalzi says arguing with alt-right racists in good faith is impossible because they have turned argument into a game. "They're slapping down cards from a 'Debate: The Gathering' stack and the only goal is taking heads . . . If they lose, they shuffle their cards and go on to the next thing. If others lose, their life takes a hit." Knowledge and facts are beside the point. The point is to win, and facts just get in the way. Scalzi advises us not to play their game.

Sarah Jeong, a law and technology [writer](#) whose [work](#) I have long admired, used to play the game. An avid user of Twitter and a woman of color in a realm where misogyny has long been gamified, she was frequently mobbed and harassed online. Sometimes she responded with sarcasm. That would seem a reasonable response to attacks that are baseless and offensive: turn them inside out and toss the insults back. But since *The New York Times* has added her to their editorial board, some of her sarcasm has been ripped from

its context and used to pressure the *Times* to drop her. [Not happening](#), but her sins will be brought up in comment threads for who knows how long.

[Jelani Cobb](#) unpacks the vacuity of charging “reverse racism” when a person of color fights back, but thinks Jeong should have taken a different approach because people get hurt when public figures engage with the bigots who are trying to undermine them. The bigots “understand the current debate around free speech and social media not as an attempt to create parameters of decency around public dialogue but rather as part of a board game in which each side attempts to remove valuable pieces from the other’s team,” he writes. [Virginia Heffernan](#) takes a different tack. If you hire someone to provoke thought, they shouldn’t be punished for being provocative in their public life. But when the subject is racism, Cobb argues people on the sidelines get hurt. The all-too-predictable reaction to a person of color defending herself serves “to strip away the moral authority of people belonging to a vulnerable group, in order to make the spurious argument that they’re too compromised to hold anyone outside that group accountable.” Like [judges whose parents were born in Mexico](#): impossible for them to be objective.

Another thing riling folks up at the moment is whether the action Facebook, Youtube, Spotify, and Apple have taken against Alex Jones, conspiracy theorist and luxury outfitter to survivalists, removing his rage-filled, fact-averse rants, is a slippery slope. Won’t it threaten everyone’s freedom of speech if Nazis can’t march through Holocaust survivors’ newsfeeds? Will it give the conspiracy theorists an authentic reason to complain?

Twitter is the outlier. It claimed Jones hadn’t violated its [policies](#). It turns out [he has](#), but [oh well](#). Jack Dorsey, Twitter’s CEO, [said](#) Twitter would not rule on whether something was false or not, it was the media’s job to argue with Jones and prove him wrong. “Accounts like Jones’ can often sensationalize issues and spread unsubstantiated rumors, so it’s critical journalists document, validate, and refute such information directly so people can form their own opinions.”

But in an era when the president (who says things on Twitter that would get non-celebrities suspended) repeatedly tells his followers not to trust the news, this is a ridiculous statement. Moreover, it’s asking the press to call attention to nonsense that has created real harm. (For example, the parents of a child murdered at the Sandy Hook massacre have to live in hiding because Jones’ followers physically harass and threaten them. [Jones’](#)

[attorneys say](#) they are public figures, and therefor the bar for defamation is very high, even though their current notoriety is due to Jones whipping up his followers by claiming their son's death was a hoax and they are acting for a government plot.) There's [a strong argument to be made](#) that the press should not be amplifying conspiracy theories by reporting on them in detail and dignifying manufactured nonsense with fact-checking.

We haven't yet found a sure-fire way to recognize and counteract the gamification of discourse by people who don't care about facts or fairness, so white supremacists, neo-Nazis, and money-making conspiracy theorists who practiced their rhetorical games in shadowy parts of the internet before going mainstream have been able to make reasoned discussion impossible. As they leave their computers to show up at places like Charlottesville or Comet Ping Pong Pizza or at a Trump rally, they'll find new followers. And despite their home-made armor and jokey-offensive T-shirts, they aren't just playing games.

Reductio ad It's All a Conspiracy

October 11, 2018

I was discouraged, hearing Trump [repeat](#) the bogus conspiracy theory that George Soros is behind the demonstrations against his Supreme Court nominee, claiming that all of those women storming Congress were paid “crisis actors,” that Trump is channeling Info Wars from the White House. Discouraged, but only with a vestige of shock. His behavior is numbing (intentionally).

I was a bit shocked, though, when that ridiculous and inflammatory claim was [picked up by Republicans](#) who could have simply touted their success at confirming a controversial justice, but instead are stooping to absurd false narratives to turn up the heat for their already-inflamed base. I was genuinely shocked this morning, when the same claim popped up on my local television station in an attack ad against the Democratic party candidate in my swing district. I guess I shouldn't be. The Republican party knows they can't top Trump, and their best chance is to act like Trump and suppress enough vote to keep their majority. So sure, parrot the line that all opposition is paid for and isn't genuine even if that means there is no actual debate about issues anymore, just accusations that the people, like the press, are fake.

I remember civil rights activists being discredited as “outside agitators” and protesters against the Vietnam war being called Commies. This seems to be going a step further. The opposition is not real. Dissent is staged and paid for by evil Jewish financiers. This is not an anti-Semitic dog whistle, it's a siren, and it's blaring in Europe, Russia, Brazil, and China. It's showing up in [vile neo-Nazi flyers on college campuses](#). If someone looks or thinks differently than you, don't trust those people. At his many rallies, Trump has been parroting extremist political memes about the left as an ungovernable, illegitimate mob. The president is essentially declaring those who are not with him – the majority of Americans – the enemy.

The present moment, these folks argue, is not complex or contentious, it's beautifully simple: it's all a plot against us, and anyone who opposes us is the enemy of “real” Americans. Simplicity is comforting. It's also dangerously delusional.

When the Tea Party began storming public places and yelling at politicians,

opponents often blamed Koch Brothers funding. They did pour money into the political movement, just as George Soros has poured money into his Open Society Foundation and various political causes he believes in, just as oceans of dark money sloshes around so much of our politics thanks to new rules that allow political representation to be purchased in secret. But I don't remember anyone claiming the people at the Tea Party protests were actors, that they the Koch brothers personally employed all of those people to protest, that they were expressing no authentic grievance. News organizations wrote story after story trying to help everyone understand them. That was then. Once you have succeeded in persuading people the press is the enemy, that elections are rigged, that climate change and sexual assault are hoaxes, that the only truth comes from your leader, you can get away with saying pretty much anything.

I'm discouraged that the message that enemies in the press are fair game seems to be enabling the [murder](#) and [disappearances](#) of journalists. I'm discouraged by a [new report](#) from the Knight Foundation that most of the Twitter accounts that pumped out false conspiracy theories during the 2016 election, for all of Jack Dorsey's gesturing toward reform, are still actively pumping out disinformation. I'm annoyed that the only action Congress seems willing to take against the social media and search platforms that were manipulated in the last election is to accuse them of being [biased against conservatives](#) and demand they amplify conservative voices. (In the past, this has not ended well – prepare for more junk “news” to show up in your feeds.)

What's odd is that I don't think young folks buy any of this. Students I talk to are skeptics – sometimes to an unhealthy degree, having trouble believing anything, but more often willing to dig deeper and compare sources, at least if it's something they care about. (A new report from [Project Information Literacy](#) due out next week will provide national findings of a study of these issues – a welcome addition to their many fine studies.) From my admittedly limited perspective, students seem to be paying attention to the daily news to a greater degree than ten or twenty years ago. Of course it's finding them in new ways – in years past they weren't inclined to turn on the evening news, but now cable news stories are beckoning when they go to YouTube; reading a newspaper may not have been part of their daily schedule, but links to stories are likely to show up on their phone as they check in with family. But they seem genuinely engaged, and I have hope this generation is onto the emotional manipulation being used by the conspiracy theorists, that they are willing to question authority but also value it when it's warranted.

Otherwise, it's just too damned depressing.

Taking Him at His Word

October 25, 2018

Words matter. Truth matters.

The president enjoys whipping up crowds, encouraging them to attack journalists, Democrats, and immigrants. He lies constantly. He has no time for anyone who isn't loyal to him. He doesn't care if he ends up killing people. He's already said his supporters will love him even if he personally shoots someone on Fifth Avenue, and they laughed and agreed. That's our guy.

Trump is our collective nightmare, the product of a media ecosystem that whips up crowds, encourages violence, and has no time for information that might challenge their assertions. He would never be president if it weren't for Fox News (sic) and its right-wing conspiracy-theorizing cousins. Fox is not a news organization. It abandoned that identity long ago and is now has such power it has achieved the status of being an arm of state propaganda. It feeds on and nourishes a whole media system, entirely separate from other media, that encourages rage, incites hostility towards those who don't agree with their positions, and spreads lies by drawing on and amplifying the radical right. People have died. They don't care. The ratings are fine and their guy is in power.

In response to one of the most stunning acts of domestic political terrorism in my lifetime – pipe bombs sent to opposition political figures repeatedly demonized by a president at his vicious, hate-filled mass rallies – the president mocked his own lip-service denouncements of violence: “do you see how nice I’m being?” Knowing full well his crowd didn’t come for nice, doesn’t believe in nice, that they know as well as he does that he thinks nice is weakness. The next morning he blamed the press for the attempts to assassinate his enemies.

← Tweet



Donald J. Trump ✓
@realDonaldTrump



A very big part of the Anger we see today in our society is caused by the purposely false and inaccurate reporting of the Mainstream Media that I refer to as Fake News. It has gotten so bad and hateful that it is beyond description. Mainstream Media must clean up its act, FAST!

6:18 AM · Oct 25, 2018

16.3K Retweets

54.4K Likes



He's almost right – but it's not the mainstream media, it's not what he calls fake news at fault. It's the right-wing media ecosystem and the rage it has harnessed that anointed him president and nudged that bomber to action.

I've just started reading [Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics](#) by Yochai Benkler, Robert Faris, and Hal Roberts. (There's an [open access version](#); that's what I'm reading while I wait for the copy I ordered.) It explains why so many people on the right could be persuaded that the Democratic candidate for the presidency was involved in a vast pedophile and why there isn't a similar embrace of absurd conspiracy theories on the left. I doubt the authors could have predicted just how relevant this research is at our fraught moment. It explains a lot – except, perhaps, whether we will have the will and the strength to overcome the ingrown, self-referential propagation of lies, fear, and anger that is so intent on denying and even destroying truth-seeking institutions, including higher education, responsible journalism, and libraries.

We have work to do if we're going to get out of this dark place we're in. I'm worried it's too late.

Stopping By the Library on a Snowy Evening

February 21, 2019

As I write this, it's snowing. It has been snowing a lot lately. It's pretty, and it keeps covering the dirty stuff up with a fresh, clean blanket, but it's a nuisance. It's also expensive. It takes a lot of labor and equipment to clear snow from roads and walkways and clearing snow isn't something that fits normal working hours. A lot of our physical plant budget will be used for snow removal. It also makes a mess for custodians, all that grit and slush tracked everywhere, but they don't have a budget for snowy mess removal, so they just have to suck it up.

When we think about library futures, we don't budget for the weather. We get pretty good at figuring out how to swap things out if our budgets are flat and how to combine roles when lines are cut, but weather can really throw a wrench in the works, and the internet has its own problems. We can't count on it to save us.

This morning as I watched the news crawl of closed schools, I noticed lot of area schools no longer declare a snow day, it's a "digital day." My college is open, and so is the library because at a residential college, the students are stuck on campus. But every day is a digital day because so much of what we do depends on the internet. Watching the snow come down, I was thinking about Amherst College's [recent network outage](#). That must have been challenging. We went without connectivity (and even electricity) for a few weeks 20 years ago after the town was hit by a tornado. Even once power was restored to the library, the stacks were closed until the broken glass was cleared out. (You'd be amazed at how well glass shards can hide in books.) There's a kind of comradery that surfaces when things go wrong and you have to figure out workarounds, at least until the exhaustion sets in and people get crabby.

Our tornado was a severe weather event that cut a mile-wide path thorough our town. It felt like Armageddon at the time, but you could walk right out of the disaster zone. Floods are worse. Fires followed by mudslides – I don't even want to think about it.

But we're all going to have to, because extreme weather events and rising

seas will affect us all, and we won't be able to walk a mile and get to a safe place. Our digital network infrastructure is at risk for different reasons, but it's seriously threatened pretty much every hour of the day, both from cybersecurity risks and vulnerabilities that come from building gigantic piles of proprietary code on top of a decades-old set of protocols that [weren't designed](#) with three billion internet users in mind.

Will we have the creativity it will take to adapt when disaster comes? It's somehow easier to imagine a post-apocalyptic world than to imagine repairing the world we have. When I think of things we take for granted, like interlibrary loan, I wonder if we'd be able to even imagine such a thing after decades of market fundamentalism underpinning our understanding of human motivation and social forces. Will we be even know how to follow the natural inclination to help each other out at a scale that is bigger than our mile-wide tornado? Market forces are not magic forces. They won't fix it for us.

Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?

May 2, 2019

Apparently Stanford's administration was publicly shamed enough to [walk back its announcement](#) that they can't possibly afford to spend money on their university press anymore because its \$26 billion endowment isn't yielding enough cash and something's gotta give. (Those [bribes](#) aren't helping the balance sheet, either, dammit.) Sharing scholarship is apparently too great a luxury for a university that has the [fourth largest endowment](#) among US higher ed institutions. The press has been given a year's reprieve in hopes we will forget how angry we got when we heard about the plan.

We've been stressing about the fate of university presses for a while, now. Fifteen years ago I wrote [a snarky piece](#) for *Library Journal* about it. This Stanford debacle is just a deluxe edition of a long trend of deciding university presses aren't sufficiently important. It's part of a larger shift in higher ed brought on when we decided government was the problem and the solution was to end social welfare as we know it and replace it with lavish corporate welfare. Why would anyone publish books if they don't make money? Elsevier makes buckets of it, what's your problem? Why should we invest tax dollars in public education if we can turn it into a private personal investment financed by turning public dollars into poorly-managed high-interest loans? If the debt load crashes the economy, that will be a shame, but the only future that matters is next quarter's earnings report. What, are you a socialist?

There's a cascade of issues, here. Thanks to austerity, public higher ed has to pay for itself. Libraries can't afford books, so presses lose a market and scholars lose a chance to share their research widely. Individual faculty purchases can't make up for lost sales because they're paid piecework and aren't sure where they'll be living next semester. What's happening at Stanford seems ridiculous, but destroying a long-term national commitment to higher education is the real absurdity. Scholarship should be a public good, an expression of the purpose of universities, not a money-maker, not a merit badge required to compete for the dwindling number of academic jobs that pay a steady wage.

Remember when people fought for an eight-hour day? That took a hell of a fight, but we got there – and then it . . . somehow vanished. I think of what

the labor movement in the US accomplished when I see the rest of the world celebrating workers on Mayday. It's unimaginable here. Workers are losers who can't even get time off.

This brings to mind two articles I read this week about public libraries. Librarians have a bad case of [vocational awe](#). People are dying? Give me that Narcan, I'll save them! People need to apply for jobs online to keep their meager benefits but have no access to the internet and no computer skills? That's what we're here for. How about providing a warm place for people without shelter, or a tolerant place for people in crisis when there are no psychiatric beds available within the nearest six counties? Hey, everyone's welcome in the library. It's almost a matter of pride – the public library is the only place in the country where everyone is welcome and you don't have to pay just to be there or risk arrest for doing nothing in public.

The public library is a wonderful institution. It should not be the only public institution left standing. [Librarians have left the profession](#) because they couldn't do the jobs of all the public servants whose jobs we have cut, not without literally losing their minds. [Librarians have been murdered](#) because our social systems have been deliberately dismantled and when that happens, society's problems have only one place left to go.

That little spurt of rage at the anti-intellectual parsimony of Stanford administrators is part of the emotional fuel that makes social media platforms so profitable. It almost feels good. Stanford did *what*? That deeper rage at having squandered the public trust and our sense of care for one another, when all we can do for our neighbor is start Gofundme campaigns, that anger doesn't come in spurts. It's a disaster spreading through smoldering seams that run under our communities, invisible but destructive, a vast fire decades in the making, too costly to put out, too big to comprehend. After a while, we assume this is how just how it works. We forget what we once built. We forget something better is possible.

Thinking About Online Hate

August 5, 2019

As we have experienced all too often, an angry white man who traveled hundreds of miles to the border to kill brown people posted a manifesto to his chums at 8chan, an internet hangout created for people who don't want any curbs on their speech and like to socialize with people who enjoy pushing the limits. (Google [stopped linking](#) to it in 2015 on the grounds it allows child pornography. Because freedom.) Racist mass murder is rehearsed there as part of [extremist reality media](#), created by supposed "lone wolves" who [form packs](#) online encouraging violence.

What has happened to 8chan this week outlines the gnarly issues we have with the consequences of online hate. What should we do?

How about deplatforming? What you see on the internet has to be hosted somewhere and the domain has to be registered. These functions are typically handled by companies separate from the sites they host. The companies that provide those services can pull the plug, and they do. Back in 2010, [Amazon stopped hosting](#) WikiLeaks after leaked US embassy cables were posted there. Though Amazon faced pressure from US government officials, it claimed it was [due to WikiLeaks violating their terms of service](#). It's kind of troubling that expression can be so easily turned off by companies without any recourse available, though I totally understand a private business not wanting to be party to mass murder. In any case, deplatforming isn't a solution: 8chan has [already found another host](#).

What about government regulation? This is, like everything related to the first amendment, tricky. Most speech is not criminal under U.S. law, and it's a good thing, too. There's a clear risk the government [might use regulations to suppress dissent](#). Besides, it's not clear to me how U.S. regulations could easily apply to a site that doesn't use persuasion algorithms that shape what you see, or how U.S. authority would reach the Philippines, where the owner of 8chan is based. I'm in favor of devising regulations to curb the power of tech corporations to scoop up personal information with very little restriction and would like to see Section 230 revisited if only to encourage the largest, most profitable platforms to take more responsibility for the harms they cause. But none of that will solve the 8chan issue.

We need better algorithms. That seems to be an article of faith among technologists, but so far the ability of artificial intelligence and clever code to sort through speech and identify actual hate speech or threats of violence is limited. In any case, the people who share mass murder manifestos on 8chan are not hobbled by algorithms, but they have an [uncanny knack](#) for manipulating us by [manipulating other media](#).

We need to meet hate speech with more speech. This was a more persuasive argument before the rise of the attention economy and the vast increase in speech enabled and encouraged by tech companies. There seems to be little evidence that more speech works for combatting the rise of violent hate online. If anything, the ways social platforms encourage [more speech](#) seems to be making us more divided, more angry, and less thoughtful.

We need better mental health treatment. Yes, we do, but it's completely irrelevant to this situation – white supremacy isn't in the DSM.

We could . . . maybe . . . do something about guns? Yup. We must. Even small steps toward regulation would reduce the opportunity for mass murder – but it wouldn't stop 8chan's denizens from planning and celebrating it.

There is no easy answer. There are approaches we can explore, including encouraging corporate responsibility, sensible regulation, better algorithms, making it harder to kill so many people in a matter of seconds, reducing harm through promoting [racial literacy in tech](#), and no doubt things I haven't thought of. But in the end it may come down to people face to face, person to person, in city hall and in the voting booth facing our racism, embracing anti-racism, and acting on it – doing what it takes IRL to make it less easy for racist radicalization to happen.

A BABEL FISH BOOKSHELF

Understanding Social Facts

The Social Fact: News and Knowledge in a Networked World by John Wihbey

Something important became clear after the redacted Mueller Report was made public. It turns out a lot of journalists got it right. Stories they reported have been confirmed by the investigatory work of the Special Counsel. Of course, there will still be a large percentage of Americans who believe it was all a witch hunt and now it's time to hunt down some Democrats to even the score, but that's the reality of the world we live in, where evidence and facts are up for debate and the very basis of determining what's true is contested through our social networks, online and off.



I'm mulling this over while reading John Wihbey's new book, [*The Social Fact: News and Knowledge in a Networked World*](#). (Full disclosure: Wihbey worked on [Project Information Literacy's](#) 2018 [News Study](#) and I'm working with PIL on [a new project](#), but our involvement hasn't overlapped.) The book is about the role of journalism in our networked world, how our current information technologies and the networks that form in and through them impact knowledge, as well as what we could do to make the sharing of knowledge healthier and less susceptible to distortion and manipulation. Wihbey does this through giving readers

clear and helpful primers on things like network science and artificial intelligence as they relate to the flows of information, all anchored in the history of journalism and network technologies – especially helpful because it shows the questions we face today aren't entirely different from ones that have been asked and answered in the past. I find that reassuring.

What does Wihbey mean by “the social fact”? It's “media content accompanied and influenced by information indicating social attention or approval.” It's the ways we understand the world influenced by the filters and recommendations built into our social systems – not just algorithmically but as part of how humans make sense of the world and how journalists play a role in finding and telling stories, and how those stories find an audience. A lot of attention has been paid to the ways social media and search platforms have become intermediaries that deny they have a journalistic role even as they filter and present news. A lot of attention, too, has been paid to the gutting of newsrooms and the difficulty of finding new business models as readers want news for free and advertising goes digital, with Google and Facebook sweeping up most of the profits. What I like about Wihbey's approach is that he digs deeper into more fundamental questions: what does it mean to share information? What role does the public play in creating shared knowledge? What role should journalists play in this networked world, and what can we learn from journalism's past? Most pressing: What do we need to do now to create better conditions for an informed democracy?

Journalism educators will be especially interested in Chapter 7, where Wihbey lays out what journalists need in their knowledge toolbox. As I read through his suggested competencies, I kept nodding because it seems exactly the toolbox librarians need, too. It even seemed incredibly applicable to what we mean by information literacy. Here's a sample:

- We need a “deep and flexible capacity to master core complex issues—to acquire, so to speak knowledge about how to use knowledge.”
- We need to understand basic statistics and quantitative reasoning in order to evaluate and create information. (I need to work on this.)
- We need “the ability to map research discourses and to discern the ‘rough state of knowledge’ within different disciplines.”
- We need to understand how the web works – not just how to use it, but how it “operates at a technical and behavioral-social level.”
- We need “understanding from business and cultural perspectives of how commercial, third-party online platforms operate and are

governed and how form and function may affect information flows.”

- We need “a theoretical sense of socially networked behavior, informed particularly by the quantitative social science and network science literature and including the techniques of social network analysis.”

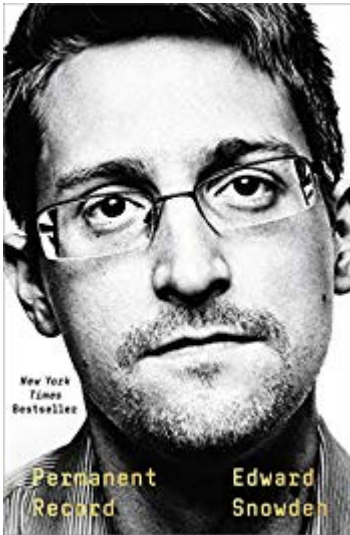
That sounds like a tall order, but both journalists and librarians have to become at least passingly familiar with disciplines that are making sense of the way information works today, because that’s what our professions are about. Basically, it’s a call for interdisciplinary learning and knowledge-building to serve the public good. This book does a good job of making complicated things understandable (he is a journalist, after all) while also anchoring it all in network science, the social sciences, and the history of technology and journalism.

For all that mastering this new set of tools seems a huge challenge given economic and social forces, I find Wihbey’s call to action invigorating. Our work matters, and while we may have a lot to learn, a lot depends on us doing our work well.

Remember What's Never Forgotten

Permanent Record by Edward Snowden

It's curious that we've become so reconciled with the massive amount of state secrets we learned about when Edward Snowden worked with journalists to expose its vast extent and power in 2013. Since then, he's lived in exile almost as long as he worked for the US intelligence services, helping to build a system that would capture, store, and make searchable the digital traces of communications of the entire world, an all-encompassing shift from targeted to mass surveillance. Yet we've become somehow used to the idea, defensively forgetting that nearly everything we do is not forgotten.



Snowden's memoir, [Permanent Record](#), doesn't reveal any state secrets he hasn't already selectively shared with the world. It doesn't tell us anything about how he got those secrets out that hasn't already been covered in Laura Poitras's film, [Citizenfour](#). It's more personal and reflective. It explains how he became entranced by technology and the internet, how he ended up following a family tradition by working for the government, which meant in practice working for private companies, how he became alarmed by the systems people like him were building, and why he decided he had a moral duty to the country he served to share what

he knew with journalists to get the word out. It's a portrait of a young geek who grew up close to the beltway and in the shadow of 9/11, so he signed up to serve rather than become a silicon valley entrepreneur. After an accident sidelined him from the military before he was out of training, he decided to follow his parents' footsteps and get a security clearance so he could apply his tech skills to government service.

He describes the anxiety around having his past scoured as he was vetted at age 22 as a way to explore the implications of all the traces we leave behind, juvenile beliefs long shed, jokes that aren't funny anymore, now all part of our permanent record. But he passed easily and that not only gave him a chance to get a job with the government, it made him attractive to contractors. Those give the agencies a workforce by allowing them to circumvent legal caps on the number of government employees. (As in higher ed, it's easier to get money to pay for commercial services than to hire people.) "It's America's most legal and convenient method of transferring public money to the private purse," he writes. Soon after he got his clearance he realized he couldn't serve his country unless he worked for the private sector, which is where high-level systems work is done. And it was being done by "computer dudes" like him. At an "indoc" orientation they were told they were special, the elite, which struck him as odd.

You don't need to tell a bunch of computer whizzes that they possess superior knowledge and skills that uniquely qualify them to act independently and make decisions on behalf of their fellow citizens without any oversight or review. Nothing inspires arrogance like a lifetime controlling machines that are incapable of criticism.

This, to my thinking, actually represented the great nexus of the Intelligence Community and the tech industry: both are entrenched and unelected powers that pride themselves on maintaining absolute secrecy about their developments. Both believe that they have the solutions for everything, which they never hesitate to unilaterally impose. Above all they both believe that these solutions are inherently apolitical, because they are based on data, whose prerogatives are regarded as preferable to the chaotic whims of the common citizen.

Within a few short years he was in a position to see how the entire system operated, and what he saw threw him into a moral crisis. Eventually he

decided the only way he could serve the nation would be to expose what was going on, whatever the personal cost. Toward the end of the book, he shifts from memoir to an argument for why privacy matters. It matters because “any elected government that relies on surveillance to maintain control of a citizenry that regards surveillance as anathema to democracy has effectively ceased to be a democracy.”

But it's not just the state that uses surveillance for control. Both government and businesses exploit our permanent records.

Algorithms analyze it for patterns of established behavior in order to extrapolate behaviors to come, a type of digital prophecy that's only slightly more accurate than analog methods like palm reading . . . its science is, in fact, anti-scientific, and fatally misnamed: predictability is actually manipulation...

We can't permit our data to be used to sell us the very things that must not be sold, such as journalism. If we do, the journalism we get will be merely the journalism we want, or the journalism the powerful want us to have, not the honest collective conversation that's necessary. We can't let the godlike surveillance we're under be used to “calculate” or citizenship scores, or to “predict” our criminal activity; to tell us what kind of education we can have, or what kind of job we can have, or whether we can have an education or a job at all; to discriminate against us based on our financial, legal, and medical histories, not to mention our ethnicity or race, which are constructs that data often assumes or imposes. And as for our most intimate data, our genetic information: if we allow it to be used to identify us, then it will be used to victimize us, even to modify us – to remake the very essence of our humanity in the image of the technology that seeks its control.

Of course all of the above has already happened.

Permanent Record is both a memoir of growing up with technology and an argument for breaking the law as an act of moral patriotism.

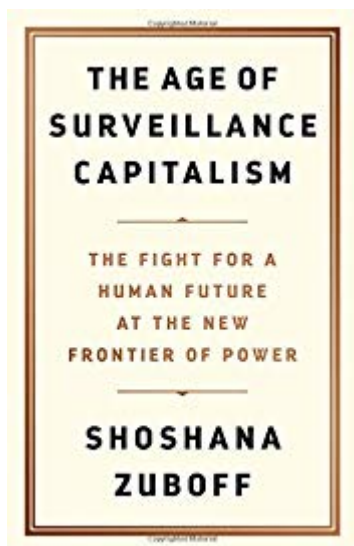
As for me, I'm interested in data privacy as a condition for intellectual freedom because that's stuff librarians care about. The implications of digital record-keeping and prediction are inescapable. We've become so inured to these systems we use them for enrollment management – [this Washington Post article](#) about it is chilling. Learning analytics, too, have the potential to

be invasive in ways that fail to respect students' agency and right to self-determination. I recently had a chance [to pose some questions to Kyle Jones](#), the PI for the [Data Doubles](#) project, and his answers made for interesting reading in tandem with Snowden's warnings.

We have choices to make. Deciding we don't have a choice is the easy way out, but it would be a terrible mistake.

The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: A Mixed Review

I have finally finished reading Shoshana Zuboff's epic book, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*. It's an impressive work that ties together a lot of trends into a very spooky picture of where we are headed when intimate data about each of us is used as the raw material for prediction and control.



What started as search and social platforms without much of a business model were transformed by the accidental discovery that the data trails we leave behind whenever we go online – “behavioral surplus” – is extraordinarily valuable. The more engaged we are online, the more these companies know about us, and the more they know, the more they can sell predictions of our behavior for people who want to modify it. The old saw about free platforms – if it's free, you're the product – isn't quite true. You're not the product, you're the site of raw material extraction, and that extraction isn't just to sell ads, it's to provide the means of control to anyone who will profit from it.

That Fitbit your employer paid for? It feeds information to insurers that can use to change your behavior and reduce costs – or charge you more if you don't comply. Google drove into our neighborhoods with camera-equipped cars to capture images of our communities and create detailed

maps that will be useful for routing their self-driving cars and even planning entire [cities](#) where everything will be connected and everyone's life experience moment by moment can be rendered as data. As Zuboff puts it, "It's not the car; it's the behavioral data from driving the car. It's not the map, it's the behavioral data from interacting with the map. The ideal here is continuously expanding borders that eventually describe the world and everything in it, all the time" (132).

We tend to think of this as an invasion of personal privacy, but to Zuboff this is a stealth usurpation of our freedoms. By insinuating themselves into our lives and keeping their operations and goals secret, these capitalists use interventions to "nudge, tune, herd, manipulate, and modify behavior in specific directions by executing actions as subtle as inserting a specific phrase into your Facebook news feed, timing the appearance of a BUY button on your phone, or shutting down your car engine when an insurance payment is late" (202). As they roll out wearable devices, "smart" homes, and "smart" cities all designed around capturing and using data, we will have no places of refuge. We'll be nudged relentlessly in the kind of value-free behavior modification people were disturbed by when B. F. Skinner originally touted it.

What makes Zuboff particularly indignant is that this is not the kind of capitalism where benefits and risks are shared. These companies not only see the workings of a hand that is invisible to us, they guide it for their benefit and, in so doing, control us in what she calls "a coup from above." Apparently she originally titled the book *Master or Slave?* – you can see the planned cover displayed in the [Worldcat library record](#) which grabbed the pre-publication image and didn't update it. It sounds like a lost Ayn Rand novel, and that's what brings me to my reservations.

It's not just that the book is repetitive and too emotively indignant (this is a case where the old saw "show, don't tell" might have been good editorial advice), it's the fundamental argument that I can't entirely buy. First, I'm not as convinced as she appears to be that capitalism before what she astutely calls the "neoliberal source code" of surveillance capitalism was so wonderfully balanced and just, that if we just had the right restore point we'd be fine.

Second, and more importantly, this week has demonstrated how little control these platforms actually have over their rendered data-subjects. YouTube, Facebook, and other internet platforms were so thoroughly manipulated by a white supremacist terrorist that the companies were

unable to stop the spread of a hateful message (and damage to their reputations). They gave a killer and his online wolf pack the tools, then [couldn't stop his message from getting out](#).

The story at the moment isn't that we've had a coup from above, it's that we've allowed reckless corporations to monetize speech with very few limits, algorithmically amplifying voices shouting "fire" on a crowded planet and making plenty of money doing it. We've allowed these surveillance capitalists to carry out endless experiments on all of us to perfect the tools of persuasion without insisting they simultaneously understand and contain the risks. The trouble isn't just that they want to control us, but that they are unwilling to take responsibility and instead use their billions to fend off regulation while continuing feckless experimentation. They may aspire to total control, but meanwhile their control is dangerously shambolic and criminally careless.

Zuboff concludes "if democracy is to be replenished in the coming decades, it is up to us to rekindle the sense of outrage and loss over what is being taken from us . . . the human expectation of sovereignty over one's own life and authorship of one's experience" (521). We certainly should heed her warning, but as chilling as the idea of being controlled by giant corporations is, the immediate problem is demanding they figure out how to deal with lawless behavior they've encouraged. We must find the civic will and means to insist they give a damn about what happens when their powerful tools of persuasion can be used indiscriminately by anyone who masters their tools, whether state actors, corporate owners, home-made YouTube stars, or violent extremists bent on turning mass murder into mass spectacle.

Why the Right Is Better at the Internet

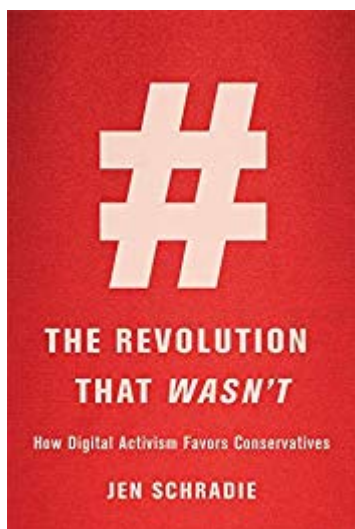
The Revolution That Wasn't by Jen Schradie

Eight years ago, when Occupy Wall Street protests and the Arab Spring used social media to organize and publicize protests against economic inequality and state oppression, it seemed the internet was on the side of youthful progressivism and liberal change. Mark Zuckerberg made that a point as he [took Facebook public](#) (while taking care to [retain personal control](#) over the company):

There is a huge need and a huge opportunity to get everyone in the world connected, to give everyone a voice and to help transform society for the future ... People sharing more – even if just with their close friends or families – creates a more open culture and leads to a better understanding of the lives and perspectives of others. We believe that this creates a greater number of stronger relationships between people, and that it helps people get exposed to a greater number of diverse perspectives.

By helping people form these connections, we hope to rewire the way people spread and consume information. We think the world's information infrastructure should resemble the social graph – a network built from the bottom up or peer-to-peer, rather than the monolithic, top-down structure that has existed to date.

The statement jumbles together changing the world through authentic person-to-person communication with discovering the “best products and services,” which, to be fair, might have been more important to investors than rewiring social relationships, but also seems to imply shopping and marketing are the apex of our human activities. But it also presages the jumbling of political persuasion with targeted sales techniques – and look where that has gotten us.



In spite of the circa-2011 belief that communicating via social media would topple hierarchies and give ordinary people the power to change society and foster equality, things didn't play out that way. As scholars like Zeynep Tufekci [have pointed out](#), authoritarian states can use social media, too. Then came the Brexit referendum and the 2016 U.S. election, and we realized the powers of persuasion, unregulated, have changed our political landscape profoundly (though those changes actually predate social media through the rise of talk radio and Fox News; many of us simply didn't pay much attention to what we didn't personally consume). Jen Schradie, a sociologist and assistant professor at Sciences Po in France, tackles this shift in her book, [The Revolution That Wasn't: How Digital Activism Favors Conservatives](#). The right is simply better at this than the left, and Schradie's study explores why that is.

Between 2011 and 2014, she conducted a multimethod field-level study of over 30 groups that were involved in a fight for collective bargaining rights for public-sector employees in North Carolina. These ranged from grassroots Tea Party groups to established conservative political organizations to a variety of unions and left-wing progressive groups. Much research in this arena looks at how digital platforms shape social movements, but she reversed that relationship to see how social factors affect internet use. Four key factors come into play: access to technology, skills to use it, a sense of empowerment and enough time to devote to the care and feeding of websites and social platforms. Though the Black Lives Matter movement used social media effectively, Schradie argues that was an outlier for left-

wing activism. Class and age are factors in how successfully a group could use digital tools: those with more education, more access to computers and time to spend on social media have an edge. If you run through the data plan on your phone before the month ends and don't have home internet, if you have never used social media and don't know anyone who does, if you're working two jobs and spending most of your free time trying to get from one to another, the internet will be less use to you than existing social ties through churches or friends and family relationships. So most of the organizing on the left end of the spectrum had to reach people face-to-face, often having to update contact lists as people moved or dropped phone plans, and didn't have much of a public presence online because nobody had the time or skills to keep a web presence up-to-date. Besides, if you are worried about losing your job because you're agitating for a union, you don't want to be publicly identified.

Contradicting the classic appeal of the internet as a leveling, democratizing force, Schradie found more hierarchically organized groups made better use of internet tools than nonhierarchical groups. Horizontal or leaderless organizations tended to focus on building trust through face-to-face meetings and eschewed centralized communication strategies. Ideology was another key factor. On the right, the fight was for freedom, and digital evangelists used the internet to get their truth out there, feeling their take on reality had been ignored or distorted by the press. This gave grassroots organizations like the Tea Party something in common with more traditional and well-funded conservative organizations; a constellation of right-wing outlets shared messages about their truth, amplifying it. On the left, the fight was for fairness, a much harder concept to agree on. There was more inward-focused negotiation among organizations, an aversion to making disagreements public and less of a coherent message across them.

"The media's focus on the use of technology by left-wing protest movements had people looking in one direction while a wave was cresting from just outside their field of vision," Schradie writes. Though she doesn't speculate whether digital activism influenced the 2016 election, she does question the assumption that the internet favors grassroots and leaderless movements. It turns out wealth, power, a compelling message and strong institutional ties matter. She comes to the [same conclusion as the authors of *Network Propaganda*](#) – that the rise of the right wasn't influenced as much by filter bubbles and digital architectures as it was a case of Trump benefiting

from a strong belief systems and “an information wave among conservatives that had been building for years.”

She concludes:

The age of digital utopianism seems to be at its twilight. In the long night ahead, digital activists of all stripes will try to seize the internet's potential for their cause. If the digital activism gap continues to widen, the dawn will bring an age where only some citizens can make their voices heard. That would not just snuff out the dream that technology can be a force for progress; it would extinguish the possibility of a truly democratic society.

I found it a fascinating book that adds new insights to our understanding of the information landscape we live in today, one that focuses more on people than on tech. For another, more learned take on this book, I recommend @librarianshipwreck's (aka Zachary Loeb's) [review in boundary2](#).

Labor and Digital Tracking

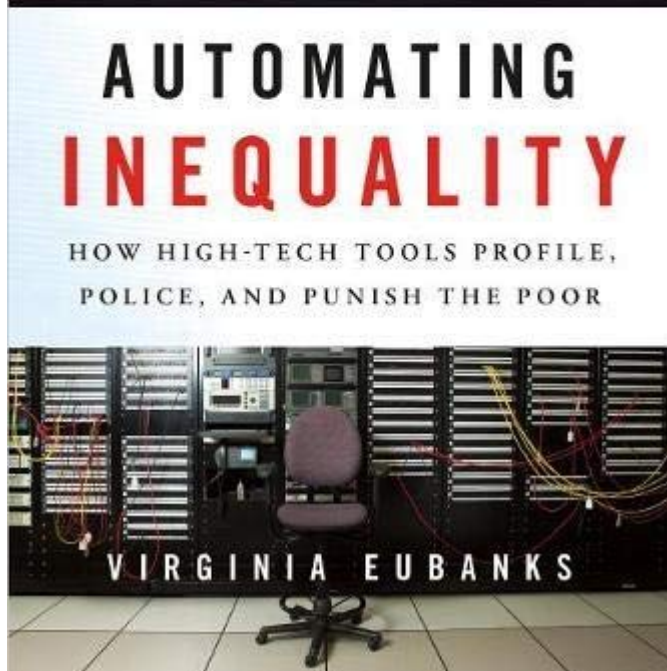
Automating Inequality by Virginia Eubanks

Happy day after labor day. If you're sitting at a desk in your office, there's a chance it was made by [someone making two dollars an hour or less](#). Much less.

Of course, maybe you don't have an office because you're part of the majority of academic labor that is hired by the course or has a long-term non-permanent gig. But if you stop by, say, the Minnesota History Center or a major public university library to do some research, there's a good chance you're sitting at a table made by someone who's incarcerated and paid far less than minimum wage.

If you watch California fires raging and feel for the heroic men and women on the front lines, carrying heavy equipment and wearing hot gear in 100-plus degree weather, bear in mind many of them [are paid a dollar a day](#). They are incarcerated "volunteers." This is part of what [a national prison strike](#) is about. You might have heard about it, but possibly not; it hasn't gotten much coverage.

You could argue that prison industries are a good thing because incarcerated people learn skills and work habits. It's too bad that when they're released they often can't get a job because they have a criminal record. They probably don't even get a chance to discuss with a human being what they learned while working in prison because a computer system kicked their application to the bottom using an algorithm. Chances are another algorithm will send them back to prison if they fail to adhere to parole requirements, like failing to have a job or permanent address or ability to pay for their parole expenses.



As it happens, I just finished reading [*Automating Inequality: How High-Tech Tools Profile, Police, and Punish the Poor*](#) by Virginia Eubanks. I was especially curious about the algorithms used in social services, but it's not just about technology, it's a brilliant book about how we penalize poverty. It would make a great pairing with [*Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*](#) by Matthew Desmond. Both books make it clear how badly shredded our social network is and how well hidden poverty is now that it's treated as a personal failing rather than as a social issue we should solve because it's bad for all of us, unnecessary in the richest nation on earth, and unjust.

Eubanks focuses her research in three locations: a failed approach to automate public benefits eligibility determination in Indiana that

nevertheless managed to permanently remove many people eligible for benefits from getting help; an app for deciding who among the thousands of homeless in Los Angeles could get processed into housing; and a flawed system in Pennsylvania for deciding which children are at risk and should be removed from their homes. These attempts (with the exception of the first, which appears primarily a mean-spirited system for punishing the poor) are generally well-meant, but tackle the wrong problems. There's a housing crisis in Los Angeles and across the country, and deciding who to shuffle into a limited number of shelter beds or subsidized housing doesn't do anything to address that crisis. The algorithm implemented in Pennsylvania does a pretty good job of measuring the effects of poverty, but nothing to help children subject to abuse or neglect in households that aren't already implicated in state systems because they receive benefits from Temporary Assistance for Needy Families or the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program. Wealthier families that experience problems that lead to child neglect don't have public data gathered on them that might predict whether a child should be removed from the household. An employee of the company building this predictive system told Eubanks it would great to include data from babysitters, therapists, or rehab centers, but nobody on earth would agree to have such personal information gathered by the government. The poor have no choice but to be monitored, measured, and sorted, and now we do it with computers.

Eubanks frames this system in our history – first the poorhouse, then scientific charity, now a digital poorhouse that isolates and punishes using supposedly “unbiased” systems that are trained with biased data.

Like the brick-and-mortar poorhouse, the digital poorhouse diverts the poor from public resources. Like scientific charity, it investigates, classifies, and criminalizes. Like the tools birthed during the backlash against welfare rights, it uses integrated databases to target, track, and punish . . .

However, there are ways that the analogy between high-tech tools in public services and the brick-and-mortar poorhouse falls short. Just as the county poorhouse was suited to the Industrial Revolution, and scientific charity was appropriate for the Progressive Era, the digital poorhouse is adapted to the peculiar circumstances of our time. The country poorhouse responded to middle-class fears about growing industrial unemployment: it keeps discarded workers out of

sight but nearby, in case their labor was needed. Scientific charity responded to native elites' fear of immigrants, African Americans, and poor whites by creating a hierarchy of worth that controlled access to both resources and social inclusion.

Today, the digital poorhouse responds to what Barbara Ehrenreich has described as a 'fear of falling' in the professional middle class . . . The digital poorhouse is born of, and perfectly attuned to this political moment. (pp 178, 183-4)

It's nearly invisible, scalable, persistent, isolating, and will, in time, embrace all of us as webs of sticky personal data are woven around our lives.

Because of Labor Day, the Washington Post [profiled a photographer](#) whose works illuminated the hard lives of working children and made people care. I chose one of those photos for my personal website, not knowing much about it but because it's beautiful and poignant – a girl turned away from a giant mechanical loom to gaze out a window. Lewis Hine had to fake his way into factories and fields to document child labor in [photos like this one](#), and the human stories those photos told helped launch a movement to end it.

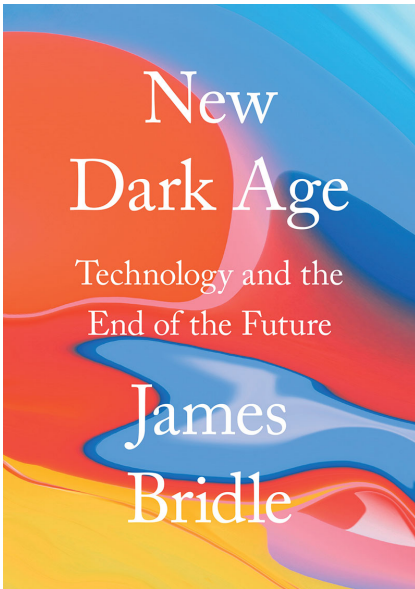
It's hard to get inside and take pictures of the trade-secret digital poorhouse, but *Automating Inequality* does a great job of showing why we need to pay attention and unite in fighting economic and political systems that keep too many of us either in or just one medical emergency or job loss from isolating, humiliating, quantified poverty.

Living in the Uncanny Valley

The New Dark Age: Technology and the End of the Future by James Bridle

I can't recall how I heard about James Bridle's new book, but somehow I became aware of it and wrote to its publisher, Verso, and they obliged me with an advanced reader copy. I thought I might make a start on it when I had a short-haul plane trip, but by the time I got home the next day, I had very nearly finished it. It's dense, demanding, and totally compelling, though if I only had the title to go by, I might have passed it up. I'm wary of books that have the words "future" in them, or "the end of" and have read too many dyspeptic critiques of technology that are full of sound and fury but are more incensed nostalgia for a fabled golden past than insightful critique. So if you're like me, don't be put off by the title, *New Dark Age: Technology, Knowledge and the End of the Future*. It's very good.

[Bridle](#) is both a visual artist and a writer who grapples with the meaning of technology and how its reins seem to have slipped from our grasp, taking us to unexpected and eerie places. In this book



he explores those places, from the ways computation has made us doubt our senses, to the ways we use it to forecast the weather (but increasingly can't because our predictions depend on a past that was, uh, predictable), how high frequency trading can obscure

the workings of markets and create high-speed and senseless crashes, the rise of machine learning, mass surveillance, and the conditions that make conspiracy theories thrive. Above all, it's about a present in which we've simply lost any way of knowing for sure because we have too much information. "The cloud" is full of data yet totally obscure.

My copy of this book is full of underlining and notes that climb around the margins. I feel like those overwhelmed organic chemistry students, highlighting everything because it all matters and it all connects, and yet ultimately the information world he's describing – none of it makes sense. Which is kind of his point: "it is ultimately impossible to tell who is doing what, or what their motives and intentions are . . . Nobody decided that this is how the world should evolve – nobody wanted the new dark age – but we built in anyway, and now we are going to have to live in it" (p. 239).

(That bit of the title, by the way, isn't some technophobes invocation of the fall of the Roman empire; it's the last words of the first paragraph of H. P. Lovecraft's "The Call of Cthulu" published in the pulp magazine *Weird Tales* in 1926. Seems appropriate.)

Among the underlined tidbits, I noted this: "Data is the new oil" was apparently coined a little over a decade ago by the owner of Tesco, a ubiquitous chain store in the UK, when describing the value of its supermarket rewards card – give up a bit of information about your shopping habits for a discount and, if lots of people do it, Tesco gets masses of valuable information about buying patterns. But people tend to forget what he really was saying: data isn't useful until it's refined and turned into something. Now it's just one wildcat strike after another, so we're struggling through a vast slick of information that's churning up things we don't even recognize, that have used technology to turn information into something that is the opposite of knowledge.

Some try to rescue themselves from the constant barrage of information by grabbing hold of stories that seem to make sense – conspiracy theories are one response to having a great deal of information about events and little sense we can do anything in response: "The resulting sense of helplessness, rather than giving us pause to reconsider our assumptions, seems to be driving us deeper and deeper into paranoia and social disintegration" (p. 186) Or it drives us to capitalize on the network by creating nonsense content – YouTube videos that mash up keywords and brands to take advantage of out-of-control algorithmic exploitation in "industrialized nightmare production" (228). Yeah, think twice before you pacify your toddler with your phone.

There's an ocean of deeply disturbing content out there turning nursery rhymes into ad-generating spookiness. And YouTube doesn't have a clue what to do about it. None of us do.

Our thirst for data, like our thirst for oil, is historically imperialist and colonialist, and tightly tied to capitalist networks of exploitation . . . Empire has mostly rescinded territory, only to continue its operation at the level of infrastructure, maintaining its power in the form of the network. Data-driven regimes repeat the racist, sexist, and oppressive policies of their antecedents because these biases and attitudes have been encoded into them at the root.

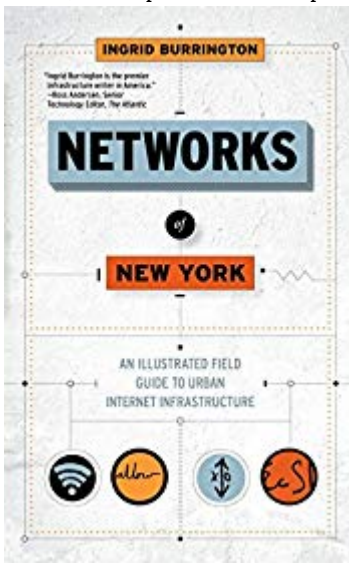
In the present, the extraction, refinement, and use of data/oil poisons the ground and air. It leaches into everything. It gets into the ground water of our social relationships and it poisons them. It enforces computational thinking upon us, driving the deep divisions in society caused by misbegotten classification, fundamentalism and populism, and accelerating inequality. It sustains and nourishes uneven power relationships: in most of our interactions with power, data is not something freely given but forcibly extracted – or impelled in moments of panic, like a stressed cuttlefish attempting to protect itself from a predator. (246-7)

Is there anything to be done? Well, we can try to see the shape of things that are all around us, yet somehow hidden, not just how these technologies work but “how things came to be, and how they continue to function in the world in ways that are often invisible and interwoven. What is required is not understanding, but literacy” (3) – and by that he doesn't mean increasing digital skills, though that doesn't hurt, but being able to think about where systems came from and what the consequences are. He urges us to consider “guardianship” that is “based on the principles of doing the least harm in the present and of our responsibility to future generations. Our understanding of “systems and their ramifications, and of the conscious choices we make in their design, in the here and now, remain entirely within our capabilities” (251-2). Well, that's a relief. It's also a tall order. Reading this book is a good start.

Living Inside the Internet

Networks of New York by Ingrid Burrington

[Ingrid Burrington](#) is an artist and tech writer who grew curious about the strange hieroglyphics scrawled on sidewalks and decided to decode them. Thanks to her, I now can look at the spray-painted squiggles that recently appeared in my alley and know what they are telling me. Underneath that battered asphalt packets of information are flowing from one point to another, and a particular company owns the conduit that carries them.



[Networks of New York: An Illustrated Field Guide to Urban Internet Infrastructure](#) is a handy little book just published by Melville House that shares some of what Burrington has learned about the physicality of the internet simply by walking through the city and paying attention to what's going on underground, at the surface, and over our heads. "In the span of about three city blocks," she writes, "I can usually figure out where there's buried fiber optic cable (and sometimes who owns the cable), which devices hanging above traffic intersections are talking to one another, how many cell towers are in the area, and whether I'm currently under surveillance." Though she specifically writes about New York, what she explains can help you do the same in other cities.

Two things about this book fascinated me – first, how little most of us know about how this system we all depend on actually works, and second,

how *much* work goes on behind the scenes. Hooking all these bits together so bits can be sent from place to place depends on digging trenches, pulling wire, erecting antennas, and mapping all of this new infrastructure to the urban past. Some of the optic fiber we rely on today travels through ducts that once carried telegraph wires. Some of that history can be read on manhole covers. Some is in buildings built for telegraph systems that now are home to hundreds of thousands of miles of fiber optic cable. The networks we depend on daily “inherit the legacies of past networks in the same way they inherit landscape.” As Burrington puts it

The landscapes of the Internet are folded into the landscapes of everyday life. We basically live inside a really big computer . . . What we think of as personal computers today are just bits of aggregated hardware in a much larger, more complicated computer that is the Internet. But living inside a computer doesn't look like a cool science fiction movie or any of the stock images used to describe the Internet. It looks like cities, highways, buildings, and the infrastructure that supports them.

I feel a little more aware of that living architecture by using this field guide, but I'm also more aware of how tangled the corporate and government interests are within this vast computer. Telecom companies have vanished, but their veins and arteries live on under the streets, carrying traffic for new companies and offices. Some of the above-the-ground equipment on lampposts now conveys information to make cities “smart.” LED lights can read how busy an intersection is and monitor weather – and soon will also be able listen for gunshots, once they fold in Shot Spotter technology. Those handy gadgets you may have in your car to automatically pay tolls are also following you through cities that have mounted readers over intersections to monitor traffic – and probably other things; a New York ACLU freedom of information act request located these readers, but did not uncover how that data gathered is stored and who can use it.

Quite a lot of the tangled corporate-government infrastructure has grown out of the billions of dollars spent to prevent another 9/11 attack. The NYPD has mounted surveillance cameras around the city, some marked and others unmarked, and so have private businesses, some of which feed information directly in the Domain Awareness System, a counterterrorism program built by Microsoft that is rolling it out to other cities. The NYPD mounted cameras

on squad cars to take pictures of car license plates to capture information about where vehicles were at different times, something federal agencies were also doing. Now that work is being done for New York and many other cities by a company called Vigilant Solutions, which has gathered over two billion records of where cars have been based on automated license plate readers. That data is combined with other data, including facial recognition, for law enforcement to use for a hefty price.

A lot of our communications infrastructure is keeping an eye on us, but it's a one-way mirror. Companies that gather this data can license access to it to governments while keeping everything about their systems invisible to the public through non-disclosure clauses. When police have used cell phone tower simulators purchased with Homeland Security funding, product secrecy is so paramount prosecutors have sometimes had to drop cases against criminals to avoid the public learning about the technology through discovery or a trial. This is how things work these days.

It's a very small book, but it has expanded my understanding of the actual stuff that connects us – the cables underground, the antennas that sprout on tops of buildings, the gadgetry at intersections that measures traffic and weather and who is going where. Now, when I see colored paint scribbles on the pavement, I'll have an idea what they mean. I'll also be looking up to wonder about who's looking down at me.

Snoopers in the Valley

Surveillance Valley: The Secret Military History of the Internet by Yasha Levine

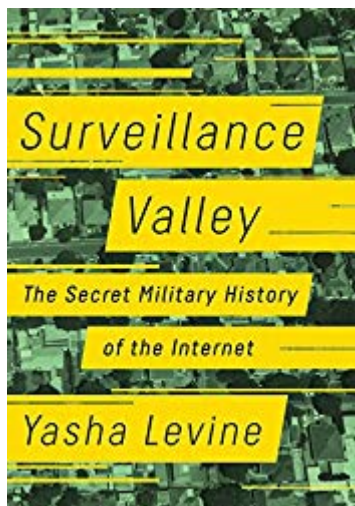
If knowledge is power, then certainly the secret and unlimited acquisition of the most detailed knowledge about the most intimate aspects of a person's thoughts and actions conveys extraordinary power over that person's life and reputation to the snooper who possesses the highly personal information. And by vastly expanding the range and power of the snooper's eyes, ears and brains, the new technology facilitates and magnifies the acquisition and use of such information. Moreover, as long as surveillance technology remains unregulated and continues to grow at an accelerating rate, the free and enriching exercise of the rights guaranteed by the Constitution and the Bill of Rights will inevitably be chilled to the point of immobility by the general awareness that Big Brother commands the tools of omniscience.

John V. Tunney, preface to [Surveillance Technology](#), a staff report of the Subcommittee on Constitutional Rights of the Committee of the Judiciary, US Senate, 1976.

There was a time when people were skittish about computer networks and their capacity to be used for social control. I remember back in the late 1980s when our local public library cooperative adopted an online catalog citizens at a public meeting voiced concerns about the government keeping a record of what they had read. Library officials reassured them records wouldn't be retained once books were returned, but the fact that information was computerized by a government office was worrying. That feels a little quaint, now that our location is known by companies we never heard of, our faces can be picked out in a crowd and matched to our identity, and piles of data about us are being analyzed to sell us shoes or a political candidate or to determine whether we should get a job or a loan. As for bringing those voice-activated microphones into our homes so we can have the convenience of asking aloud to have a song played . . . I can't even.

What Google and Facebook know spills over into what the state knows about us, even at the local level. Local police scour social media and contract with companies that track our cars through license plate recognition

systems and provide facial recognition services. On a grander scale, Edward Snowden's 2013 revelations showed our intelligence agencies have access to pretty much whatever they want from companies that make a public show of resisting the Man while holding profitable government contracts. Though employees are beginning to balk at writing code for military applications, we seem to have mostly forgotten about how much spillage there is between our search and social habits and the intelligence community.



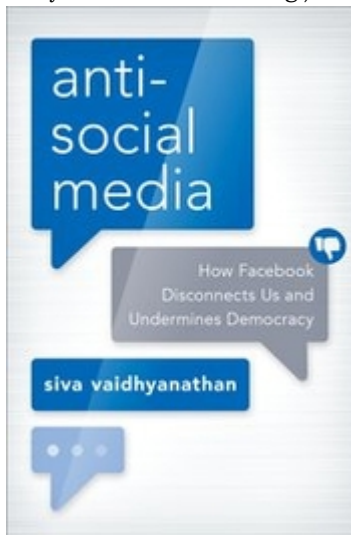
The relationship is complicated, and it always has been. I just finished Yasha Levine's fascinating [Surveillance Valley: The Secret Military History of the Internet](#), a journalistic account of the origins of the networked world we're living in. (The footnotes are a treasure trove.) The supposedly free-wheeling, freedom-loving internet started as a military project opposed by student protestors during the Vietnam war, for good reason. In addition to using computers to analyze data to support counterinsurgency in southeast Asia, the Defense Department used their systems to monitor dissent at home. In the post-Watergate era, domestic surveillance was reined in, temporarily, as Congress held [hearings](#) and wrote [reports](#) and people read things like a [1967 cover story in The Atlantic](#). For a little while we were shocked, and we pushed back.

That's worth remembering. Maybe I'm overly optimistic, but it feels as if general disgust with the tech companies that scoop up so much of our lives may have reached a tipping point leading to new legislation to restore some balance and rein in what tech companies can do. If we don't do something, we really have given far too much power to the snoopers – and surrendered too much of our freedom.

Anti-Social Media: A Review

Antisocial Media: How Facebook Disconnects Us and Undermines Democracy
by Siva Vaidhyanathan

Facebook has been in the news a lot, lately. It's getting flack for apparently violating a 2011 consent decree with the FTC by sharing data with device makers, including Chinese firms, one of which our intelligence agencies considers dangerous. After denying for years they're in the content business, they're funding original news programs to be created by news networks as their latest approach to fixing the problems of disinformation going viral on their platform. And now they're partnering with community colleges to train students in "digital literacy" – or rather, in how to use social media in marketing campaigns. (It would be more honest to call this "digital marketing" but it's an indicator that Facebook is practically synonymous with the internet in much of the world, just as being online has become synonymous with marketing.)



As it happens, I just finished reading Siva Vaidhyanathan's new book, *Anti-Social Media: How Facebook Disconnects Us and Undermines Democracy* (Oxford UP). It wasn't supposed to be out this soon, but the brouhaha over Cambridge Analytica accelerated the publication date. It's compelling and couldn't be more timely. Vaidhyanathan, whose previous book was *The Googlization of Everything (and Why We*

Should Worry), believes Mark Zuckerberg is entirely sincere when he says he wants to bring the world closer together, that he simply has no concept of history, sociology, or any of the things he might have learned in school had he been paying attention – or if he had less of a sense of naïve but godlike hubris. In a letter Zuckerberg wrote to shareholders, sharing creates a “more open culture and leads to a better understanding of the world” with absolutely no inkling of how people might use its unprecedented ability to micro-target messages for mischief. “If Zuckerberg were more committed to naked growth and less blinded by hubris,” Vaidhyathan writes, “he might have thought differently about building out an ungovernable global system that is so easily hijacked. Facebook’s leaders, and Silicon Valley leaders in general, have invited this untenable condition by believing too firmly in their own omnipotence and benevolence” (p. 4). Facebook does indeed connect the world, but it works by encouraging “engagement” and that means the most emotionally charged messages will get the most traction.

After framing the problem in his introduction, Vaidhyathan describes features (or bugs) of Facebook in chapters that focus on how the Facebook machine operates on us in terms of pleasure, surveillance, attention, protest, politics, and disinformation. The problem with Facebook isn’t going to be solved easily, because its fundamental design and its unprecedented reach work against thoughtful democratic deliberation. “If you wanted to build a machine that would distribute propaganda to millions of people, distract them from important issues, energize hatred and bigotry, erode social trust, undermine journalism, foster doubts about science, and engage in massive surveillance all at once, you would make something a lot like Facebook” (19).

For me the most fascinating parts of this book had to do with the ways Facebook has worked with political campaigns and the ways right wing movements deployed Facebook among other social networks to promote fringe agendas. To Facebook, political campaigns are just another marketing challenge: how to sell a candidate by capturing attention and tailoring messages to individuals. Who needs Cambridge Analytica when Facebook can do even more to target and persuade? Who needs a party platform when you can whisper different messages in voters’ ears, ones designed around their personal interests and tastes and inaudible to everyone else? The Clinton campaign had Facebook consultants but relied more on their own in-house strategists and traditional messaging channels. The Trump campaign used Facebook much more effectively. “By timbre, temperament, and sheer force of personality, Donald Trump is the ideal manifestation of

Facebook culture . . . After a decade of deep and constant engagement with Facebook, Americans have been conditioned to experience the world Trump style. It's almost as if Trump were designed for Facebook and Facebook were designed for him. Facebook helped make America ready for Trump" (p. 174).

So too did white supremacist groups that used more obscure channels to plan their assault on the public sphere, testing out various messages and memes before launching them on YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook. As those messages spread, mainstream media begin to report on them, and Facebook in turn amplified those stories. Instead of connecting us, Facebook, which values all content in units of "engagement" rather than importance or truth, rewards those who interact with one another the most, solidifying our insular affinity groups.

We've seen how polarized our politics have become, but what many Americans fail to grasp is how influential Facebook is abroad. The campaigns that elected Modi in India and Duterte in the Philippines were coached by Facebook employees. In Cambodia, the dictator Hun Sen uses Facebook "Free Basics" (a freemium model of internet access – free use of Facebook, a paid option for anything else) to solidify his rule and attack opponents. In Myanmar, a country which had virtually no institutions to disseminate information other than the rumor mill, the arrival of "Free Basics" fueled a genocidal attack on a minority group. "Facebook allows authoritarian leaders and nationalist movements to whip up sentiment and organize violence against enemies real and imagined. It's like nothing before . . . Facebook does not favor hatred. But hatred favors Facebook" (195).

Vaidhyanathan does have some solutions in mind, but they are not the simple tweaks Facebook proposes. There's no way at this point to reengineer a platform that rewards hasty, emotional, shallow engagement or moderates content to ensure two billion people behave themselves. We need to support institutions that generate knowledge and develop publicly-funded forums for discussion and deliberation. We need government interventions (hard to imagine at the moment, but not without historical precedent). We need to work across borders to make these steps multinational if not global. And we need to do it soon. The lamps are going out all over Europe again, and far beyond.

Vaidhyanathan points to some hopeful signs, but concludes "as anti-rational, authoritarian, nationalist movements gain strength, enabled by Facebook, the prospects for the necessary movements and deliberation get more remote every year. If we are going to take a global stand to resist the

rising illiberal oligopoly and reform our information ecosystem, we must do it soon. It's getting dark-quickly" (220).

Read it and weep – and then let's get to work.

Naming What We Know About Writing

November 1, 2015

Academic librarians have been kicking around the idea of threshold concepts ever since a revision of the familiar [information literacy standards](#) proposed that we could rethink our approach to instruction in the art and craft of inquiry. The new [Framework](#) proposes several big ideas that could inform the learning that happens in our libraries. I really like this conceptual approach and the way it shifts the focus from learning skills to a more interesting and challenging set of ideas about how information works and how we make meaning. But it's a significant shift in emphasis, and this new framework has, for now, been "filed" as one of many documents rather than adopted as a revision of the standards.

That has not stopped librarians from reworking their curricula and assessment plans with a hasty enthusiasm that I sometimes find dismaying. These aren't concepts you can cover in fifty minutes. Well, you could, but so what? They aren't (to my mind) things librarians teach at all. They describe the kind of learning we design our libraries to nurture, but which is largely dependent on faculty in the disciplines who create the learning situations that will most profoundly influence whether our students cross these thresholds or not.

So I have this odd mix of excitement and concern about how librarians might use threshold concepts which made me eager to read a new book, [Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts of Writing Studies](#) edited by Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle. This idea-packed book comes from the Utah State University Press, which very nearly closed its doors a few years ago due to budget cuts. I'm so glad it survived to publish books like this.

The book, a "crowd-sourced" collection of essays that involved over forty distinguished composition scholars, addresses two questions: "what do we know about writing?" and "how can what we know inform curricula and assessment of student writing?" The first half of the book identifies "what we know" – a lengthy list of key concepts related to writing, described in short essays. The list of concepts was collectively arrived at and constitute a

state-of-the-art look at the key ideas that have bubbled up through decades of research and practice. Among the threshold concepts are these ones that struck a chord with me as paralleling the meaning-making moves we are actually talking about when we say “information literacy.”

- Writing is a social and rhetorical activity
- Writing is a knowledge-making activity
- Writing involves making ethical choices
- Writing speaks to others through recognizable forms
- Texts get their meaning from other texts
- Writing enacts and creates identities and ideologies (Literacy itself is not ideologically neutral.)
- Writing is linked to identity (something that seems critical as students begin to recognize their own authority to construct knowledge)
- Failure can be an important part of writing development (and of conducting research)

All of the concepts, however, are interesting and thought-provoking and each is (amazingly) unpacked clearly in a mere page and a half. The editors are careful to call these ideas provisional, not a canonical list but an “articulation of shared beliefs providing multiple ways of helping us name what we know and how we can use what we know in the service of writing” (xix). These concepts must not be used as a checklist, they caution, which would strip away their complexity. “This type of learning is messy, time-consuming, and unpredictable,” the editors write. “It does not lend itself to shortcuts or checklists or competency tests” (9). Oh, yes.

The second half of the book explores how what writing scholars know can be used in practice, with chapters on using threshold concepts in first year writing courses, in an undergraduate major, and in graduate programs, a chapter on assessment, and on training writing center tutors. There’s a chapter on using these concepts in faculty development and a concluding chapter on Writing Across the Curriculum. I found these last two chapters particularly valuable. Rather like librarians who are committed to information literacy, writing scholars are committed professionals who are often seen as people who merely provide a service. They have to negotiate sharing their disciplinary expertise with recognizing the role faculty in other disciplines play in developing students’ writing abilities. Instruction librarians have a similar dilemma – we feel responsibility for a kind of

learning that largely happens in other people's classrooms. Helping ensure that faculty across the disciplines feel both prepared to enable that learning and committed to making sure it happens is one of the biggest problems we face. This is why I was so intrigued by Chris Anson's closing chapter which addresses way to make what writing scholars know useful to faculty in other disciplines teaching writing. His final paragraphs offer a caution that librarians need to consider, too: "when not to cross the threshold."

When threshold concepts are reduced from verbs to nouns, from their fully articulated, active form (along with plentiful explanation) to buzzword and catch phrases, many faculty will balk, and resistance an follow . . . certain threshold concepts introduced too glibly can trigger false assumptions, resistance, or confusion among faculty. 216

Many librarians seem so eager to adopt the new Framework that I worry complex ideas will be flattened into a list of things to cover in library sessions, a small canon of ideas to name and test for recall. In reality these ideas about how information works and how students can participate in making meaning can't really be grasped except through sustained experience. Since for most students that experience is likely to come through courses and majors, we librarians need to find ways to work with faculty (how often we have said this!) to share the responsibility and the teaching practices that will help our student cross the thresholds of understanding that we jointly believe are important. The penultimate chapter by Linda Adler-Kassner and John Majewski provides a helpful discussion of how to "extend the invitation" to use these big ideas that we think are so important as grounds for a conversation about how these concepts play out in different disciplines, how to identify ways to sequence learning to build understanding over time, and how to see how these experiences can matter beyond specific disciplinary situations.

I recommend this book to librarians as well as to faculty right across the disciplines. It packs a lot of knowledge about writing into a small but rich package. It also might provide librarians with a model for how to talk to our non-librarian colleagues about the big ideas we all hope students will grasp without reducing them to a checklist to be covered in library sessions.

Catching Up with Safiya Noble's *Algorithms of Oppression*

Safiya Umoja Noble's *Algorithms of Oppression* is a book I waited for impatiently because I was familiar enough with her research to know it fit my reading interests and was important in my profession. It's the culmination of years of studying the ways algorithmic information systems – Google Search in particular – represent people who are not white and not male. She noticed years ago, when shopping for her nieces, that black girls looking themselves up, would see lots of porn because that's what Google thought you must be looking for. After she published an article about it, those search results changed. There's no way of knowing what prompted the change, but every so often, when Google is called out for search results that are surprising – denial sites, for example, topping the list of results when searching for information about the Holocaust – they make some tweaks. This is not a systematic overhaul of how the algorithm works, it's PR and brand protection, with a side of “oh heck, we didn't expect that to happen.”

Noble unpacks the trouble with corporations that have no public accountability except to shareholders dominating our information landscape and, in particular, how problematic their systems are for women and people of color. The design of our most dominant information gateway poaches unpaid labor, imagines the world to be just like those who write the code to sell attention and adds, and gives us back a reflection of ourselves that is warped by not jumbling information together without context. Its dominance means journalists now have to make their stories more sensational to be found in the din, and that whole communities lose their connections as their own histories are crowded out. (There's an excellent interview that shows how Yelp has affected one black woman's business and how the system we may use casually to check out options actually demands constant payments from businesses to make their online profiles more visible while making networks of word-of-mouth less vital.)

This is a book librarians and anyone else who worries about the state of our information systems should check out. I'll share a few of the many quotes I noted down to give you some flavor.

Algorithmic oppression is not just a glitch in the system but, rather, is fundamental to the operating system of the web (10).

Google's enviable position as the monopoly leader in the provision of information has allowed its organization of information and customization to be driven by its economic imperatives and has influenced broad swathes of society to see it as the creator and keeper of information culture online, which I am arguing is another form of American imperialism that manifests itself as 'gatekeeper' on the web (86).

Algorithms are, and will continue to be, loaded with power (171).

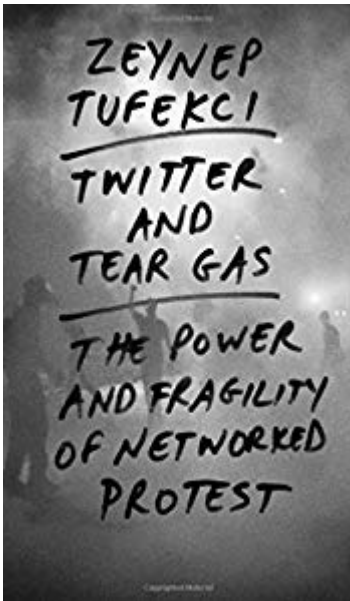
Though in an epilogue, written after Trump's election, Noble admits her solutions – strengthening the social institutions that are unlikely to get anything but decreased budgets and creating public options – aren't in the cards, she believes we need to change our information systems fundamentally.

Without public funding and adequate information policy that protects the rights to fair representation online, an escalation in the erosion of quality information to inform the public will continue . . . My hope is that the public will reclaim its institutions and direct our resources in service of a multiracial democracy. Now, more than ever, we need libraries, universities, schools, and information resources that will help bolster and further expand democracy for all, rather than shrink the landscape of participation along racial, religious, and gendered lines" (181, 186).

When the Internet is Angry

Twitter and Teargas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest by Zeynep Tufekci

I've been reading articles, blog posts, and tweets by Zeynep Tufekci, a Turkish-born scholar who works at the North Carolina School of Information and Library Science and is a long-time Berkman Center figure, for some time, enjoying her commentary on digital platforms and on political happenings around the world. I was excited to learn she had a book coming out that would expand on her analysis of how networked protest uses the internet to advocate for change – and how the powerful use it to surveille dissidents and undermine their messages.



Many new protest movements are leaderless by design, with some activists knitted together through friendship and solidarity networks, but when a massive number of people linked by the weak ties of social networks come together, leaderlessness can lead to a few loud voices holding outsized power to prevent forward movement or things can disintegrate into internecine bickering. Many movements that scaled up quickly found themselves facing a “tactical freeze” when circumstances demand a decision be made or some new challenge faced. Movements need a repertoire of capacities to flourish. They can be skilled at communicating

a powerful narrative, such as Occupy shining a light on inequality; they can push their cause through disruption – Tahrir Square in Cairo is a major chokepoint for a busy metropolis and filling it with protesters has an effect – or they can engage in political systems to force change, something the Tea Party movement did with great efficacy, partly with funding from deep-pocketed sources but largely because they believed they could capture the flag – and it was worth capturing. Gaining enough faith in existing systems to put in the work of changing them is a challenge many movements don't think is worthwhile, but is now being addressed by new electorally-focused left-wing movements such as Indivisible.

States that want to preserve their power have also adjusted to the new affordances and constraints of the networked public sphere and have shifted from cutting off internet access (which, it turns out, doesn't work) to new strategies that take advantage of a major currency of internet communication: attention. Rather than try to squelch protest messages, they now are likely to use multiple strategies to make it hard for a message to get through.

In the networked public sphere, the goal of the powerful often is not to convince people of the truth of a particular narrative or to block a particular piece of information from getting out (that is increasingly difficult) but to produce resignation, cynicism, and a sense of disempowerment among the people. This can be done in many ways, including inundating audiences with information, producing distractions to dilute their attention and focus, delegitimizing media that provide accurate information (whether credible mass media or online media) deliberately sowing confusion, fear, and doubt by aggressively questioning credibility (with or without evidence, since what matters is creating doubt, not proving a point), creating or claiming hoaxes, or generating harassment campaigns designed to make it harder for credible conduits of information to operate, especially on social media which tends to be harder for a government to control like mass media.

This is a fascinating and timely book in the way it examines political movements, including first-person views of events in Egypt and Turkey, and even internet-only protests such as the mass opposition to SOPA and PIPA, two bills that faced a wave of online opposition that led some to conclude “the internet is angry.” (It was actually more complicated than that.) We can learn a lot from this book about the ways our digital platforms shape and are shaped by people and the decisions they make: whether to have a “real names” policy, whether to use an algorithm to choose what news is

fed to whom and in what order, how platforms respond to harassment and mobbing and how people manipulate those design decisions for their own ends.

If you're interested in what's happening in the world today, this book is a fascinating read. Even if you're not, it's an unusually informative book about digital platforms usually examined apart from political life. Social interactions in the digital world in the context of political activity is insightfully explored through this wonderfully readable academic study.

Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest (Yale UP) is a very good book – academically rigorous, fun to read, and informed by a wide-ranging knowledge of both protest movements from the Zapatistas to today's mass marches and the ways that technology is shaping (and is shaped by) the people who use it to organize. She quotes historian Melvin Krasner:

Technology is neither good nor bad; nor is it neutral.

We have a habit of thinking technology will work miraculously on our political lives as a democratizing force – or, conversely, will make us all stupid. Tufekci's research reveals how complex the reality is and how the capacity of social networks to spread calls to action quickly and organize massive protests without requiring an established organizational infrastructure contains a hidden weakness: it's difficult to sustain a movement if it didn't go through the hard work of negotiating decision-making and building trust and the hard-won strength to respond to new challenges.

Lulz and Dissent

Last March, I read Alice Marwick's [Status Update](#), a fascinating ethnographic account of Silicon Valley culture and how entwined that culture is in the design of the social media platforms that we use daily. It's a world that presumes good things come to those who are smart and work hard and, within this meritocracy, everyone's an entrepreneur with a personal brand to develop.



I've just finished reading another ethnography that provides a fascinating counterpoint. Gabriella Coleman, a cultural anthropologist at McGill University, has been studying Anonymous since 2008 and has a terrific book coming out this November from Verso, [Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy](#). Members of Anonymous and the tech workers who created Twitter, Facebook, and many other hot tech brands have some things in common. They resist hierarchy and value individuality. They socialize and develop projects using Internet channels. They aren't intimidated by established institutions and resist government control.

But there's a fundamental difference. The culture Marwick studied values aggregating wealth and attention. Anonymous abhors personal attention-seeking as a means of accumulating capital. While Marwick showed a culture that assumed individual striving could lead to entrepreneurial success, a

form of success created by capturing data about social interactions online, the portrait Coleman develops of Anonymous is an anarchic collective that subsumes individuality to the pursuit of lulz (deviant humor) and the free flow of information. In a sense, it's the free-wheeling ethos of the old Internet at war with the new, one that is dominated by giant companies that determine the rules about how we will interact online and promote personal branding to conduct monetizable surveillance. Remember the New Yorker cartoon, "on the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog?" Now corporations operating through the internet not only know who you are, they know what brand of dog food you buy.

Coleman's book starts with the disreputable roots of the Anonymous collective in the boisterous trolling conducted on 4Chan, which embraced anonymity and practiced extreme Rabelaisian permissibility. In a sense it was the "primordial stew" that gave rise to a movement that is characterized by deviance that is carnivalistic in the Bakhtinian sense and yet has a strongly moral bent when it comes to free speech. For an anthropologist, the self-organizing complexity of this constantly morphing group is a fascinating puzzle. Its anti-celebrity ethos, which also values individual rights, upends "the ideological divide between individualism and collectivism" while presenting an alternative approach to the society itself.

Anonymous began to recognize its potential as a political force when some members suggested their collective trolling power should be directed at the Church of Scientology, which was using strongarm tactics to suppress a video they objected to. Mass trolling worked. Coleman was able to observe how that initial protest came together and how it set the stage for other forms of dissent, including attacks against banks that tried to cripple WikiLeaks by cutting off access to donations. Anonymous began to take on other political causes. It (they?) played a significant role in the opening weeks of the Arab Spring and launched other actions, including some that have backfired, such as the recent release of an incorrect name when protestors at Ferguson demanded to know which officer shot Michael Brown. These actions are often what one Anon called a "moral pretzel," very similar to the ethical issues that come with any disruptive political direct action, but with greater legal consequences. And like any protest movement that gets the attention of the authorities, it is subject to infiltration by informants and agents provocateurs.

Coleman does a fantastic job of chronicling Anonymous's political turn while explaining her own moral pretzels as a researcher. She illuminates a

movement that bucks the cultural trend to self-promote and examines the “fractal chaos” of a leaderless collective that is deliberately hard to pin down but looks a little bit like the Internet when it was young.

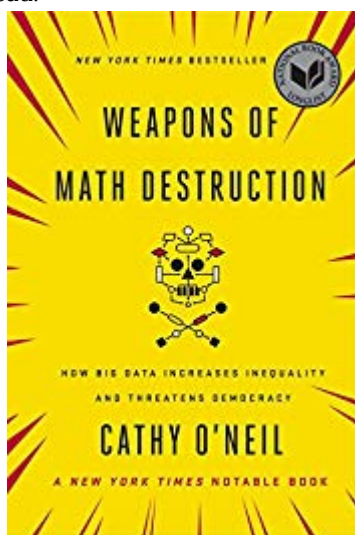
Reading studies like this and Marwick’s *Status Update* make me impatient to figure out how to better prepare our students to engage in the world by understanding the structures of information that are evolving around us. While students need to recognize what scholarship looks like so that they can learn about the ethical practices underlying scholarly discovery, the world of information exhibits its own fractal chaos that makes the oversimplified categories “scholarly” and “popular” misleadingly naive. That said, this book demonstrates how valuable it is to have scholars studying phenomena like the emergence of Anonymous as a radically collective political force

Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy won’t be released until November, but meanwhile you can read some of Coleman’s articles about Anonymous in [Wired](#), the [Index on Censorship](#) and [elsewhere](#).

Weapons of Math Destruction: The Dark Side of Big Data

Weapons of Math Destruction by Cathy O'Neil

So often when someone starts a Twitter message with the label “Must read” I get defensive. You’re not my teacher. I’m a grown up. I get to decide what I’m going to read, thank you very much. But I’m really tempted to start this post with “Must read” because Cathy O’Neil’s book, *Weapons of Math Destruction: How Big Data Increases Inequality and Threatens Democracy* is important and covers issues everyone should care about. Bonus points: it’s accessible, compelling, and – something I wasn’t expecting – really fun to read.



O'Neil is a data scientist who taught at Barnard before being seduced by the excitement of applying mathematics to finance, working for a Wall Street hedge fund before the crash of 2008. One of the things she quickly learned was different from academic mathematics was that employees were treated like members of an Al Qaida cell: the amount of information they could share was strictly limited so that if anyone was captured by a competing firm, they couldn't reveal too much. Also, the scale of their collective if obscure work was ginormous. Subprime mortgages were a three trillion dollar market, but the markets created around them through credit default swaps, synthetic CDOs, and other weird financial

inventions based on math and baloney was twenty times that size. As it all began to collapse, the damage cascaded, and people, lots of people, got hurt.

These risky financial instruments, like many other proprietary big data projects – what O’Neil calls “weapons of math destruction” – have features in common. They are opaque (few people could understand them even if they weren’t trade secrets that cannot be examined by those who are subject to the decisions they make); they work at large scale, and because they are sealed systems, they can’t learn from their mistakes. They can do a lot a damage and are bizarrely unaccountable for it, often claiming greater objectivity than the fallible humans who encode them. Her experience in high finance is a cautionary tale because the features that crashed the world economy are present in big data systems that affect our lives in myriad ways, from education to jobs to the criminal justice system to how we are persuaded to vote.

Two of her early chapters deal with the effect of these big data systems on higher education. On the one hand, they feed the hysterical and costly race among elite schools to game U.S. News’s ranking system, making colleges “manage their student populations almost like an investment portfolio” and enhance their status, often at the expense of actual students. She also examines how for-profit schools manipulated personal data to target the vulnerable.

The marketing of these universities is a far cry from the early promise of the Internet as a great equalizing and democratizing force. They find inequality and feast on it. If it was true during the early dot-com days that “nobody knows you’re a dog,” it’s the opposite today. We are ranked, categorized, and scored in hundreds of models, on the basis of our revealed preferences and patterns. This establishes a powerful basis for legitimate ad campaigns, but it also fuels their predatory cousins: ads that pinpoint people in great need and sell them false or overpriced promises. The result is that they perpetuate our existing social stratification, with all of its injustices.

That injustice is scaled up in programs like predictive policing, which magnifies human prejudices, and algorithm-based sentencing: “we criminalize poverty, believing all the while that our tools are not only scientific but fair.” Companies that have turned to Big Data to manage the tiresome business of hiring low-wage workers use personality tests to

“exclude as many people as possible as cheaply as possible” – and they don’t correct for their mistakes because they never check to see if that excluded employee actually turns out to be very good at something. Of course, these tests are used more on the poor than on the wealthy, who would never put up with it. Big data also is used to schedule workers to maximize efficiency, giving them a few days’ notice, making it impossible to schedule daycare or take courses and get ahead in life. Systems that rate teachers are based on nonsense, and secret and flawed formulas are used to determine whether we are credit-worthy.

Her penultimate chapter looks at ways these WMDs undermine democracy, and it’s particularly timely. By analyzing personal data and targeting us with highly personalized political messages, we never know what promises a candidate is making to our neighbors or see the same news they read that persuades them of something that seems to us nonsensical. We are increasingly living in different worlds, sculpted to fit different world views, micro-targeted to the point “e pluribus unum” no longer pertains. Rather, divide, divide, divide and conquer.

O’Neil doesn’t hate data. She loves mathematics, but hates the ways its being deployed on us. In her conclusion she suggests the ways we could use data to make lives better, if we didn’t use money as a proxy for goodness. With transparency, open audits, and a willingness to take up the problems these systems expose, we could do great things for the public good.

Dare I say it? I will. For anyone who cares about information systems and how society works these days, it’s a must read.

Afterword

I was invited to write [an essay](#) for the tenth anniversary issue of the Journal of Information Literacy. Since it's a personal reflection on three decades of my life as a librarian, it seemed a fitting way to close this collection, so here it is, a version slightly different than the final publication of record, which uses British spellings and had to translate some oddities of American Higher Ed English Usage.

Not long ago I was nonplussed when I came across a planning document from the early 1990s in which I had spelled out where I thought our instruction efforts needed to go. It was eerily identical to our current Things to Do list. It was dispiriting. They were good ideas. They were just much harder to implement than I ever expected. It doesn't help that every year new students show up, baffled and anxious, and newly-hired faculty arrive, needing to be coaxed to think intentionally about the potential of our small library as a site of learning when they are busy with new courses and their own research. Our plans inevitably have required work from faculty in the disciplines. It's work they own as one of their teaching responsibilities, and they embrace it, but they aren't always as keen to schedule meetings to coordinate efforts.

I can sympathize with these faculty, knowing how difficult it is to focus when beset by stress and distractions. As I write this it's hard to concentrate because events keep intruding with new shocks and daily emergencies. We're living in an era of resurgent white nativist hostility to the world I thought I lived in. While I have been committed to information literacy as an essential learning outcome for most of my life, It suddenly seems ever more urgent that we get this right. We need to help our students learn what they need to know so that when they go out into the world they will be prepared to change it for the better. Judging by the rise in student activism and their involvement in grassroots resistance, they seem to be up for the challenge. But am I?

I'm using this opportunity—the happy celebration of a decade of open access information literacy publishing—to practice some self-reflection. Looking back at my three decades in the field, a time marked by enormous changes in our information systems and practices, it's surprising how persistent are the challenges we've faced. We have always wanted new

students to feel comfortable and able to navigate their library so that they can feel at home in the academic community. As Michelle Holschuh Simmons (2005) has put it, we can serve as disciplinary discourse mediators for students who migrate among different disciplines and don't always speak the language. This is important work, but it's not nearly enough. We also want students who are moving into their major fields of study to be able to join the scholarly conversations of their chosen discipline. By having significant research experiences, they can grasp the role of individuals in creating knowledge. At its best, this experience can provide them with a sense of personal agency and can help them find their own voice. Ultimately, with that identity and confidence established, we hope they can go out into the world when they graduate prepared to act on it as free human beings in a society that badly needs healing.

I have always felt information literacy should be integral to each student's education, not just so that they can succeed as students but so they will have the capacity to influence the world and the confidence to try. Those were our goals back when our instruction involved helping them flip through a card catalog to find books or work systematically through annual volumes of abstracts to find citations to articles which would then have to be located on the shelf. We still have those goals, though the ways information is created, circulated, and built upon has altered what this work looks like. What has remained constant is the kind of deep learning students need to experience, which is independent of the form information takes. Developing a successful information literacy program is a matter of overcoming the structural, institutional, and entirely human difficulties we have in creating and sustaining meaningful learning experiences that involve students in exploration, inquiry, and creation.

I'm going to frame these personal reflections in the form of autoethnography, a methodology that I explored last year with an innovative learning community established by Anne-Marie Dietering, Robert Schroeder, and Rick Stoddart to support contributors to a book on the method and its application to library and information science, forthcoming from ACRL Publications. Though ethnographic methods have been applied successfully in academic libraries (e.g. Foster and Gibbons, 2007; Duke and Asher, 2012), autoethnography is less well-known. This reflective method is an attempt to use one's lived experience as a site of study, applying the same sort of analytical process we might use in other forms of scholarship. It's also an

effort to open up scholarship to a more personal voice and a wider range of narrative forms than those usually available to scholars.

What follows is a narrative about one librarian's experience working with students in a single institution across three decades. I will use my personal experience and map it to what seems to me to be three distinct periods: the bibliographic instruction era, the age of standardized information literacy, and the relatively recent age of critical information literacy. There is some overlap in these periods, some blending at the boundaries, but the language we've used to describe what we do went through distinct changes—while leaving behind, as happens with language, strange remnants of the past. I'm pretty sure we're not the only librarians who absent-mindedly still refer to classes held in the library as “B.I. sessions”.

In each of these three periods, information literacy has been argued for and shaped by widespread social anxiety about education and technology that has political, social, and economic dimensions. Over the years, we felt these perturbations in my library and responded to the official documents that the librarian community has developed to guide our efforts, adjusting our practice in various ways. Yet when I held that old document in my hands and realized the institutional goals we have today were on our agenda decades ago, I realized some things haven't changed at all.

Locating My Practice in My Past

In 1987 I started work at the library of Gustavus Adolphus College, a small undergraduate institution in rural Minnesota that was founded, like many American colleges, in the nineteenth century. The residential liberal arts college is as iconic an American institution as large public research universities, but since I had never attended such a college I asked a great many questions about it during my job interview. Now this environment is so familiar to me, I can't even remember what those questions were.

The college, founded by Scandinavian immigrants, retains traces of its Swedish cultural roots and an affiliation with the Lutheran church, but its students currently represent both the descendants of European immigrants and more recently-arrived Minnesotans from Mexico and Central America, Southeast Asia, and East Africa. (Though the land the college occupies belonged to the Dakota until the 1851 Treaty of Traverse des Sioux,

indigenous students have never been well-represented on campus.) Students have traditional liberal arts majors to choose from (in the arts, humanities, social sciences, and sciences) as well as several pre-professional majors, including nursing, education, and business management. All of the students experience a liberal arts general education along with courses in their major concentration. The relatively small size of the student body (2,300) and small class sizes, combined with the fact that nearly all of the students live on campus, makes it a tightly-knit community. “Community” is, in fact, one of the institution’s core values, and in interviews I conducted with students last year the word was invoked most often as something that they valued about the college, frequently citing the relationships they develop with faculty both in class and through out-of-class research and mentoring opportunities as an example.

Though this college, situated on a hill overlooking a small town, looks like a set for a nostalgic film about college life, our students face the same challenges as those at larger institutions: difficulty adjusting to the rigors of college classrooms after schooling geared toward standardized testing, a rising incidence of diagnosed disabilities and mental illness, high levels of indebtedness upon graduation, and so on. Nearly all of our students receive some sort of financial aid, and most of them are employed on campus and, in some cases, in the local town as well. They are busy, over-scheduled people who often suffer from stress and distraction. That said, this residential college community has many advantages for information literacy efforts. At our college, librarians are members of the faculty and are seen as educational peers. Students have convenient access to the library compared to large commuter campuses, and our mission is entirely focused on student learning, which means information literacy programming doesn’t have to fight for resources within the library. It’s the foundation of everything we do.

The Bibliographic Instruction Librarian Arrives

When I started my new job as a full-time instruction librarian, I was warned that I would be responsible for educating the campus about our new electronic catalog. On my first day at work, I saw that several new terminals had been set up on narrow tables designed to hold card catalog drawers, their yellow cursors blinking expectantly, awaiting our commands. In my

new office, I browsed through a box of floppy disks and a file cabinet full of handouts and workbooks created by the librarian who had started the instruction program five years earlier. She had moved on, but had left behind ample evidence of her missionary zeal. Bibliographic instruction had planted its flag, just slightly ahead of the Information Age.

I soon realized that using the new catalog was not a great learning challenge for our students or faculty (with only a few refuseniks who wanted someone else to do their typing). Nor was it all that difficult for our psychology students to learn how to navigate *Psychological Abstracts* and interpret the tiny print on the tissue-paper pages of *Social Sciences Citation Index* or for history students to use the index to the *New York Times* on microfilm. It wasn't convenient to find sources this way—but it wasn't deep learning, either. What mattered more, I quickly realized, was understanding how to gain enough familiarity with a new topic to frame a meaningful question, how to learn enough of the coded language that scholars used to crack open a search, and how to unlearn the idea that research was simply a matter of finding other people's answers.

In the early days, I was the only librarian tasked with instruction. It was a bit lonely, and my only contact with other librarians doing the same work was at conferences I couldn't afford and through the published literature. In some ways it was good, because when I wanted to talk about teaching I turned to local colleagues in other departments. I learned a lot from the first director of our writing program, a new hire like me. She introduced me to the conversations among the community of writing instructors that were immensely helpful to me and deeply influenced how I diagnosed the problems students were having with research. These had little to do with knowing how libraries work but rather with arguments and audiences and arriving at questions that were worth asking. My first peer-reviewed research published in 1992 drew heavily on what I was learning from the field of composition, and my first presentation at a national librarian conference examined the parallels between our two fields. (All these years later, it still astonishes me how rare are conversations across those disciplinary boundaries.)

In those days, what we then called the “bibliographic instruction” movement was more firmly embedded in liberal arts colleges than in larger universities, primarily for reasons of scale and our institutional focus on teaching. We followed what was then called “the Earlham model,” named for a school similar to ours (though it was Quaker rather than Lutheran). The

idea was for librarians to partner with faculty to bring librarian expertise into a disciplinary context, while also bringing students into the library to be introduced to the tools of research. Being able to pursue information independently, we believed, was a valuable and empowering experience that needed to be more prominently part of undergraduate education.

I didn't perceive it at the time, but libraries were scrabbling for a public identity and sense of purpose at a time when the Reagan administration had declared our education system disastrously flawed. A 1983 report from the United States National Commission on Excellence in Education titled *A Nation at Risk* described the crisis in apocalyptic terms: "the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people" was one of its widely-quoted statements (p. 5). The report made the twin claims that educating the populace was of enormous importance (a claim teachers welcomed—their work was finally being recognized!) and that the school system, from Kindergarten through college, was failing in a way that put the country at a strategic disadvantage with other countries, Japan most prominently among them. The authors of the report used militaristic language to describe the crisis. "If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war. . . . We have, in effect, been committing an act of unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament" (p. 5).

Though the report succeeded in bringing national attention to the value of education, it rang the opening bell for a "school reform" movement that has tended to fault schools and teachers for what are actually wider social problems. Its demands for accountability have led to federally-mandated testing programs that have tied student scores to school funding and teacher evaluation and has stripped the curriculum of programs that aren't on the test. Though the 1983 report makes some surprisingly strong statements in favor of public schools as a democratic institution, the reforms it heralded laid the foundation for "school choice" (often defined as the provision of tax dollars to fund attendance at religious schools), the establishment of charter schools, and an infatuation with educational technology unmatched by funding for basics like paper and pencils. Some critics of public schools have even taken to calling them "government schools" —because to these critics everything the state touches is a sinister threat to personal liberty. Though advocates for privatizing our school system and giving parents

consumer choice make the claim that competition brings out the best in us, it should be noted that some of the desire to privatize education comes from resistance to desegregation. School choice in practice has often meant choosing not to be in classrooms with students of color.

I don't remember whether I knew about the report when it came out. However, I did read an education reform book published in 1989 at the request of the library director. He had been hearing about it and wanted to know what I thought before he went to a meeting where it was sure to be discussed. Librarian Patricia Senn Breivik and university president E. Gordon Gee used a new moniker for bibliographic instruction and their own militaristic metaphor in their title: *Information Literacy: Revolution in the Library*. While I was all in favor of advocating for the value of libraries and independent student learning, I came away frustrated and annoyed. The authors described a failed educational system full of faculty who refused to let go of passive lecture-and-textbook methods. The authors argued that change would have to come from above, from high-level administrators. At my college, faculty were (and still are) in charge of the curriculum and would resist any top-down directives. That would be a strategy doomed from the start. More importantly, I knew our faculty cared deeply about student learning and were endlessly experimenting, searching for better ways to help students learn. They believed the library was important. They wanted to give students authentic research experiences. They didn't need persuading. They needed more hours in the day and some means within their departments to negotiate how this kind of learning could be built into the program.

But this book and reports from an American Library Association Presidential Committee on Information Literacy published in the same year used similar strategies to raise anxiety about technological change and situate libraries as a solution to those fears. The crisis was framed around the claim that educational institutions' were ill-prepared to enter the "information age" in which information was replicating and spreading like a pandemic virus. People—and nations—that mastered information would be winners. Information literacy was a matter of national security. It would prepare people for new jobs, would help the U.S. economy compete against foreign countries threatening our dominance. And librarians could seize the moment and become leaders in educational reform.

It's a common rhetorical strategy, one sociologist Joel Best (1999) has described. First, create a name for something that is causing widespread social anxiety. In this case "information age" was a label that encompassed

socio-technical changes that afflicted workers with anxiety about their future as well as policy-level concerns that our industrial economy was faltering in the face of nimbler competition from Japan. Then use dramatic storytelling and melodrama to describe the situation as a significant threat. Here, the problem is that our educational system is hopelessly inadequate and that inadequacy threatens our national security. Then step in to offer a solution to the problem. All three factors were in at the birth of the information literacy era: a named threat (the growth of information and the new machines that would disrupt our lives), a narrative that builds up the threat as a significant one, and (once we're well rattled), a program to address the threat. As political scientist Corey Robin (2004) sees it, fear has become a defining feature of American political life, and the dramatic focus on risks distracts us from the less exciting work of building a better society—and, in fact, is a useful tool for accumulating wealth and power at the expense of equality and freedom. Even good causes suffer, he argues, when they rely on an appeal to fear.

Breivik and Gee open the final chapter of their book by describing the importance of developing systems for managing information in intelligence work during World War II. “While the educational crisis the United States faces today lacks the life-and-death urgency of World War II, the success (or failure) of academic leaders in confronting this crisis will have serious long-term effects on the future of our country and its place in international affairs” (p. 191). The book's final chapter switches from an information processing systems metaphor to a different one: houses of worship.

While the image works well for an academic institution, it fails at the individual level. Many people do not and will not have access to a computer, but none can escape the ongoing effects of the information society on their lives, on their ability to survive if not succeed at their jobs, and on their success in living a meaningful life. (p. 199)

The authors argue that the rise of computers is an inescapable threat to people's survival, but libraries are institutions that, like places of worship, have symbolic value and are more than buildings but are rather places that “provide pathways for seeking truth and gaining hold of a greater reality that transcends their isolated lives” (p. 199). Like the church, the library has a higher mission to empower those to whom computers pose an existential threat. The concluding paragraph opens with a G.K. Chesterton quote about Christianity followed by an exhortation.

This is our challenge to academe and to college and university presidents

in particular—to take up the difficult task of reform, to find a center that holds in the fragmented world of scholarship and education. Do not allow the difficulties involved in envisioning, promoting, and implementing a new vision for academic libraries to discourage you. Be resolute in using your leadership skills to free your library personnel and resources from outmoded images and unrealistic expectations until they can become powerful allies in the work of reforming your campus. Then the goal of fully preparing young people for the challenges of the information society will become a reality. (p. 199)

While there was much in this book that aligned with my vision of what role my library could play in our students' education, I recall being quite annoyed by the doomsday rhetoric and felt the blame for educational failure was being unfairly placed on instructors who, in my experience, were committed to making their classrooms sites of active and engaged learning. Now, seeing where educational reform has led—punitive defunding of public institutions at the expense of students and their soaring tuition costs, a growing reliance on grossly underpaid adjunct instructors, and the substitution of expensive and unproven educational technologies for permanent staff—I'm even more convinced that we've been played.

Hurrah for Standards! Oh, Wait . . .

I remember clearly when the Standards came out. (I will call them “the Standards” because “Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education” is so awkward. I've never been very happy with the phrase “information literacy” and I frankly loath the word “competency.”) But on first glance I was quite pleased. For the first time, it seemed we were acknowledging that the work involved in information literacy didn't belong to librarians, that we would have to partner with faculty in the disciplines to help students learn these complicated things. I kept the issue of *College & Research Library News* in which they were first published on my desk, folded open, ready to hand. I responded enthusiastically when one of the creators of the Standards asked librarians whether we used them. (Most likely this question was posed as an email message posted to BI-L, an email Listserv that gathered thousands of instruction librarians together from 1990 until its replacement in 2002 by an official ALA-sponsored list, ILI-L, but I can't verify

this memory because the archives for this list are not available anymore.) In any case, my zeal landed me a seat on a panel at the biannual Association of College and Research Libraries conference in March 2001.

Something happened between that invitation and the actual panel presentation. In June of 2000, I proudly presented the document to faculty who had spent a week in a grant-funded summer workshop on enhancing developmental research skills in the undergraduate curriculum. It was the last day of an intensive workshop, and people were both tired and excited about the courses they had designed, fully invested in information literacy. The room grew quiet as they read through the Standards. And then they began to speak.

They hated them. They really, really hated them.

It wasn't that they didn't believe in the importance of being able to find, evaluate, and use information ethically. They clearly did. Their complaint was that the Standards didn't adequately describe what that means in practice. The language of the document seemed to evade the idea that students might have original, creative thoughts, that they didn't merely produce products or performances but learned and shared what they'd learned by making new things. Faculty were clearly dismayed at the way performance indicators and outcomes were defined in long lists of specific measurable bits. One faculty member, a fine teacher and a well-published scholar, confessed she would fail some of the listed outcomes and wondered how we would know whether students who learned all those fiddly bits could put them together in a meaningful way. A professor of management said they read like instructions for a Tayloristic time and motion study, a mechanistic breaking apart of something intuitive and complex into simple, repetitive steps that could be performed at industrial scale.

On the one hand, I was a bit crushed. I had such high hopes that this document would bring us together. But it didn't take long to cheer up. We didn't actually need that document to find common ground. In fact, the common ground was all around us. We didn't need to sell the faculty on the importance of information literacy. They already cared about it. What we could give them as librarians was the gift of time to come together, share notes, and develop new strategies for teaching something complicated and challenging—not because we're in an information age that threatens the status quo, but because we can help students move from being an outsider, looking for knowledge that is born through a mysterious process, trailing clouds of authority, to being someone who participates in making

knowledge, who has practiced the habits of inquiry long enough to feel at home in a world where knowledge is negotiated, tested, and built upon, not merely received.

I reported our faculty's response to the Standards at the conference, and the organizers were generous in their response. The Standards, they insisted, were adaptable to local cultures. They should be negotiated with faculty. It was perfectly okay if the faculty preferred different language. The important thing was to work together so that all students were able to become information literate, however we defined and measured it.

In subsequent years, I sensed that focus on shared ownership was being eroded by librarians who embraced the standardization of information literacy, who responded to the very fact it was a set of approved rules that they could follow and wouldn't have to invent themselves. By 2005, when a colleague and I presented a poster session on how we used home-grown outcomes and measures to assess student learning at another ACRL meeting, I remember feeling distinctly alienated. Librarians were citing the numbers of particular outcomes in the same way police officers cite offenses in the criminal code. It had become a set of library rules, not a flexible shared practice, and it seemed to encourage something that was beginning to trouble me as our library collections moved online and became leased, temporary access to material controlled by corporate interests.

I can't pinpoint when I first became uncomfortably aware of this problem: our systems, originally designed to mimic card catalogs and indexes, were increasingly being compared to the ease and attractiveness of new and ubiquitous advertising platforms. There were good lessons to learn from Amazon and Google, reminders that "save the time of the user" is just as important now as it was when Ranganathan included it among his five famous rules of librarianship. I was in favor of making our catalogs more user-friendly and enticing with cover art and publisher descriptions. But assumptions underlying database design were too often rooted in the idea that searching for information was a consumer activity. It implied our job was to help students shop efficiently for sources to put together in a paper just as they might shop for clothing to put together an outfit. The linear layout of the Standards encouraged this consumerist view of research: it starts with a need to acquire stuff and ends with a coda about ethics, which too often was satisfied by invoking the rules for correctly labeling intellectual property.

This was far from the transformative experience I wanted for our students:

that moment when they would suddenly realize they had the agency to ask genuine questions that mattered to them and were allowed to come up with answers of their own. What I wanted was for all of my students to experience a moment in their academic lives when they started referring to their sources by the names of authors because they realized there were people involved, and that they themselves were part of an ongoing social enterprise. I winced when assessment focused on how well students could use our clunky shopping platforms. Learning how to perform tasks too often took up the foreground when what we wanted was for students to enter into conversations. Our technology wasn't improving student learning or preparing them for independent, critical thought. The challenge of creating transformative learning opportunities were no different than when sources were on shelves rather than online. The widespread and often uncritical adoption of the standards as library-owned rules for efficient consumerism troubled me.

Across the Threshold and Into the Woods

In 2013, I was invited to speak at LOEX, a popular instruction-focused conference. This was terrifying. I hadn't been to the conference in years, and the thought of facing a room full of librarians who lived and breathed instruction was intimidating. I worried my thinking was out of date or simply inadequate, particularly since we had totally changed our library organization years earlier in a way that distributed instruction labor among all librarians (as described in Fister and Martin, 2005). I hadn't been a sole practitioner for years, and my job now involved collection development and collective management of the library. I was afraid I'd lost my information literacy edge.

It turned out to be a wonderful experience, and I enjoyed all the sessions I attended. One, in particular, was eye-opening. Lori Townsend and Amy Hofer presented their research-in-progress on a Delphi study of threshold concepts for information literacy instruction. *This!* I thought. This is what I've been trying to get at, those mysterious transformational moments in students' lives. When I returned home, I recommended that we read an article by the presenters for our library journal club (Hofer et al, 2012). My colleagues were as intrigued by the idea of threshold concepts as I was,

but we had one quibble. Why ask librarians and LIS scholars what those thresholds are when it's faculty in the disciplines who witness them most often? What thresholds do our faculty perceive, we wondered, and what can they do to encourage students to cross them?

My colleague Michelle Twait and I wrote a grant proposal to test the idea. We brought together ten faculty members from across the curriculum to discuss threshold concepts for information literacy from their perspectives (Twait and Fister 2015). Between submitting the proposal and convening our discussions, the first draft of the new Framework for Information Literacy appeared. This document was created after a committee convened to review the Standards (something that happens routinely every five years) concluded it was time to revise them significantly. The draft document, which departed largely from the Standards, drew heavily on the idea of threshold concepts. Suddenly, this intriguing idea we'd embraced was all the rage.

We proceeded with our project, feeling a bit chuffed that we were so cutting edge. In the course of discussions with faculty we wrestled with terminology (what exactly is a threshold concept? What do we actually mean by "information literacy"?) and compared expectations for student research practices in different disciplines before creating a shared list of threshold concepts for information literacy that pertained to all disciplines. They turned out to be not too different from the six "frames" that ultimately were chosen for the Framework, but there were interesting differences. "Information has value" was a claim that our faculty found particularly problematic. While understanding the ways economic value often conflicts with academic interests is worthwhile, we learned we wouldn't want to use that wording because it suggested to our faculty cultural informants that we were promoting information as an expensive commodity rather than helping students understand the economic conditions that influence information access. Our faculty put value on citation practices as a way of knitting people's ideas together and ensuring individuals' contributions are recognized, but they did not connect that practice to market value but rather associated it with the idea that scholarship is conversation. Their views may be naive—they often fail to connect their publication choices to information privilege—but it made us realize how much perspective and word choice matters when naming ideas.

A broader difference between our locally-generated concepts and those in the Framework is that our faculty centered students in their statements more than they did information itself. Rather than "Authority is constructed

and contextual” they said things like “You will encounter things that change your view of the world and call into question things you believed to be true, which can be uncomfortable” and “Everyone’s view is partial. Sometimes those limits are invisible to us.” Rather than naming “Information creation as a process” they described it as a personal experience: “Research is a recursive process. What you learn will lead you to ask new questions.” They also insisted on including the emotional aspects of this kind of learning. “Vulnerability is required. It takes courage to go ‘out where the buses don’t run.”

I realize now that I had internalized a lesson back in 2000, when I proudly shared the newly-minted Standards with our faculty. If information literacy is truly to be a joint venture, we can’t leave faculty out of the conversation in which we name what our students should learn. We can’t carry important concepts, like tablets inscribed with “thou shalt”, down to the people to guide them. But we can, as librarians, be intentional about encouraging the act of naming. Without our small grant, faculty would not have compared notes and found language that works across disciplines. Librarians are in a unique position on campus. Our libraries are common ground for discussions like these, and it’s our job to remind our colleagues across the disciplines of something they already know, that this kind of learning is important.

Yet, what I see developing in the librarian community is very similar to what happened when the Standards were developed: the hasty development of lesson plans and modules to teach the frames as a library-centric form of learning, along with concern about developing assessment measures that will satisfy the accountability gods. How do you measure students’ understanding of deep concepts? If that’s too fuzzy, too hard, you turn them into shallow, testable fragments. The heated debates about whether adopting the Framework and rescinding the Standards was a mistake hinged largely on how to make these new expectations work in a world driven by austerity regimes and institutionalized suspicion about whether money is being well spent.

The rise of a critical sensibility in thinking about information literacy has come at a time when late capitalism is crumbling around us. The shock of the 2008 financial crisis showed how brittle the foundations were. The unfairness of an economic and political system that claimed to be regulated through the invisible but cosmically beneficent hand of market forces has become glaringly obvious. One successful political response has been to

strategically direct inchoate anger to focus on “elites” and encourage distrust of “experts” which extends to hostility toward institutions of higher learning and to entire systems of producing knowledge, including scholarship, science and journalism. White supremacists have been able to seize the moment and focus this anger not on the captains of capitalism but on immigrants, Muslims, women, people who don’t conform to a rigid gender binary, and racial minorities.

It was only after the 2016 election in the U.S. that the algorithms that shape our view of the world—the trade-secret sorting and sifting that Facebook and Google have engineered to tempt consumers to respond to advertising—have been called to account. These companies have consistently denied any responsibility for the often-dubious content they promote while designing their systems to profit on its spread. As I write this, the U.S. president, whose campaign benefited enormously from the hidden expertise of those whose power comes through manipulation, is declaring war on the press. Post-election concern about “fake news”—an amalgam of propaganda, satire, fraud, clickbait, and disinformation—has been co-opted by Trump to discredit news organizations that question his mendacious claims.

This is a serious crisis of legitimacy. Institutions that failed to stem growing inequality and did not successfully oppose the destabilizing effects of global capitalism have been designated enemies of the people (with “the people” redefined to exclude anyone who questions populist white supremacy as well as its numerous designated foes).

Librarians have, quite understandably, positioned themselves as a solution to the crisis, rushing in with CRAAP tests and LibGuides and lesson plans on how to spot fake news. We don’t have the solution. The problem isn’t spotting falsehoods, it’s that a large percentage of our population has lost faith in the very idea that there is a shared reality and a common set of tested methods we can use to understand it. The deeper lessons of a critical approach to information literacy offer far more potential to address this crisis, but they are not an easy, ready-to-hand solution.

Though it would be a mistake to promote libraries as arbiters of facts, it is a good opportunity for us to invite our faculty colleagues to discuss exactly how these things we ask students to do—keep lab notebooks, write literature reviews, compose fifty-page senior theses—prepare them for life after college. It’s not obvious. Rather than fall back on talking points about education as preparation for the workforce, it’s time to reflect in concrete ways on how these learning experiences prepare our students for a fulling

life as citizens in a troubled world. And if these things don't provide that preparation, we need to ask—what should we be doing?

Plus C'est la Même Chose

In the fall hundreds of new students need to figure out what is expected of them and what “scholarly” means and where the bathrooms are. Every semester a student who takes a methods course has to become fluent in the unfamiliar language of a discipline while trying to discern the tacit values of this new community she is joining. Every spring, a professor who embraced information literacy and designed courses that embedded librarians in an effective teaching collaboration retires and takes his knowledge and conviction with him. Every year, librarians make plans to have conversations, to be systematic about where instruction can do the most good, to embed information literacy more firmly into courses. Sometimes we dig around our files and find an old plan, printed on a dot matrix printer, that whispers the same promises: we'll have conversations, we'll be systematic, we'll make this work.

When I held that old planning document in my hand, I had mixed feelings. I felt sad for the young librarian who had such ambitions, who didn't know that thirty years on, during a crisis of faith in truth-seeking institutions, these plans would still be works in progress. I felt affirmed that the things we felt matter know were things we have cared about for a very long time. I felt frustrated that this work is so easily defeated by tight schedules and the distraction of multiple demands and too many e-mails to answer. And I wondered, as I thought about my own retirement only a few years away, whether I'd accomplished anything at all.

This is what our work is: human, messy, incomplete. I remind myself of master teachers who seem to accept this open-endedness. The syllabus is never perfect. Students stumble over the same obstacles. The urge to find a new way to tackle that old problem never goes away. Curriculum reform is always on next month's agenda. To everything there is a season. It's not too late, but it's never quite there.

Perhaps there's a kind of grace in that incompleteness. We have been too often bullied to show evidence we are worthwhile, that we measure up, that we deserve to keep our library's doors open. We've spent endless hours

in drawing up plans and niggling over the wording of the latest national standards. We count things and file reports. We may be so occupied that we forget to practice that part of our profession that is rooted in an ethic of care (Accardi 2013). We may be so occupied with national pronouncements and campus strategy that we forget we are in the present moment at a specific location where the people we are with are right this moment doing the messy work of learning (Drabinski 2014). We run the risk of being too busy to notice that student, standing over there, hesitating at the library entrance.

She may be feeling stressed about an assignment she doesn't understand, or wondering how to respond to a dubious news report her aunt just posted to Facebook, or feeling out of place in a library and on a campus where people like her don't seem to belong. She has stood there before, on our threshold. She'll be there again, next year and the year after. And if we're not too busy perfecting our standards and plans, we'll go over to welcome her. We'll give her a smile of recognition next time she comes in, and in time she will begin to feel this place is truly hers, that she is at home in the world of ideas, nurturing her newly-discovered voice, asserting her right to ask questions that matter to her. And when we no longer see her in the library, we may imagine she has taken that confidence and skill out into the world to confront lies and fight for a better world.

This is our work. It's made of fleeting moments. It's never quite right. It matters.

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