

Informed Agitation

Library and Information Skills in Social Justice Movements and Beyond

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Introduction

Our specific skill is making information accessible to the commonwealth—of which we are members. Thus, objectivity is no more than a useful abstraction—like the line of the equator. [...] The Good News is Advocacy! Participation! Librarians can *generate* information. Why watch it congeal on a 3x5 world? (West, 1972, p. [i]; emphasis in original)

Twice in one day, I am in conversations with people who say, almost verbatim, “I thought librarians were at least *liberal*—until I went to library school.”

“Do you think that there’s a core of inherently progressive values in librarianship?” I ask a friend getting her doctorate in library and information science. She stares at me. “I hope so!”

Another librarian friend reads me part of a letter from her former philosophy professor in which he declares, unbidden, that libraries are “the only admirable, non-coercive, non-competitive institution in our society.”

After a ballet class, a professional modern dancer and I chat about our work. “Wow, a librarian!” she says. “I’ve always thought librarians are so cool. I mean, librarians are pretty radical, right?”

The visiting father of a fellow member of our books-to-prisoners group, Books Through Bars, is introduced to me and another librarian. “Oh, the radi-

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cal librarians!” he exclaims. “Well,” we say, after a pause. “Mostly we just go to work.”

* * *

I don’t know of any polls conducted on the political views of librarians, but I think it is fair to say that we have a reputation (and frequently a reality) for liberalism. After all, aren’t our field’s core values infused with progressive values at some level, as is so vivid to my friend with the Ph.D.? But no matter how much of a spirit of egalitarian access, critical thought, self-education, preservation of cultural memory, intellectual freedom, and other noble values animates librarianship—or how committed an individual library worker may be to these values—our everyday jobs don’t necessarily rise above the mundane and, well, frustrating. (As I write this, a PUBLIB posting asks what to do about a patron who regularly tears pages out of their cooking magazines.) And regarding the personalities in librarianship, I think we can agree that library workers in general—including degreed librarians—are, strangely enough, a representative swath of humanity, with disparate motivations and political leanings. Some are incurious, unimaginative, ill-informed, even racist. Some embrace the weird pseudo-corporate practice of referring to public library users as “customers.” Some don’t even seem to like literature, or people.

Part of what makes librarianship so exciting is this ontological question about its politics. The library is so mainstream, yet also so...socialist. As one English librarian said (quoted in a particularly lovely piece in the non-library press about the value of libraries):

If someone suggested the idea of public libraries now, they’d be considered insane[...] If you said you were going to take a little bit of money from every taxpayer, buy a whole load of books and music and games, stick them on a shelf and tell everyone, “These are yours to borrow and all you’ve got to do is bring them back,” they’d be laughed out of government. (Bathurst, 2011)

And the library makes an appearance in a book introducing anarchism:

A library is a good present-day instance of this ethic [of mutual aid] [...] Communities see libraries as something necessary and valuable to everyday life, as something that should be freely available to all. Anyone can use the library as much or as little as they see fit, with no sense of scarcity. People can borrow what they want, with no judgment (in the ideal) about the quantity or quality of their usage. They can enjoy the library space itself, on their own or with the assistance of a librarian. They can use it without offering anything in return, or if desired, freely

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give back by donating books or volunteering time to reshel[ve] them. Imagine if everything from energy to education was such a “from each, to each” institution. (Milstein, 2010, p. 55)

Despite all its utopian flare, the metaphoric book of U.S. librarianship includes collaborations with state repression (as during World War I and the Cold War), bureaucratization resulting in homogenous and conventional collections, dubious relationships with municipal power, a conservative drive to socialize its users to the dominant culture, and other transgressions. On the other hand, ours is also a field that—at least some of the time—is a locus of popular education; connects with the “underserved” and other societal underdogs including queer teenagers, homeless people, newcomers to the country, and the lonely; links militarism and imperialism to austerity at home; facilitates scholarship both institutional and independent; and takes a feminized and very pale profession as the basis for a broader analysis of patriarchy and white privilege. On an individual level, librarianship has produced E. J. Josey, Eric Moon, Zoia Horn, Elizabeth Martinez, Sandy Berman, Celeste West, and other outspoken social justice-minded personalities of the 1960s (and beyond). During the 2012 symposium called “Practical Choices for Powerful Impacts: Realizing the Activist Potential of Librarians,” organized by the Boston Radical Reference collective, academic librarian Alana Kumbier posited that many of us get into librarianship because we have activist backgrounds and a commitment to democratic goals. She went on: “All librarians are engaged in political work. But [...] I don’t know that it’s inherently activist. But what I would say is, I think a lot of the work that we do is, especially if we’re intentionally thinking about the goals of social justice movements as we’re doing our jobs” (Critical Librarianship Symposium Boston - live recording).

This attitude fits how I’ve approached librarianship. I first got involved in books-to-prisoners work when I was twenty-two, not long after deciding that I would one day become a librarian. The ability to combine my interest in literature and reading with ideals of justice was appealing and seemed to fit with my career plans. I’ve also been an active member of Radical Reference from right around the time when the project first formed (see Lia Friedman’s essay for more details), especially with training and outreach. Personally, I find meaning from both the work I do at my place of employment and the related work I do as part of social movements. When I’ve helped give a research workshop at the Grassroots Media Conference or the US Social Forum, or compiled incarceration statistics for a Books Through Bars fact sheet, or investigated the history of a financial services company for a local Palestine solidarity group, I’ve felt that these activities are a necessary (and, I hope, useful) complement to what I do

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at my job. They remind me that the world is a bigger place than my immediate workaday routines, and that there are ways to bring my training into the movements I care about.

I'm not the first to observe that people outside of librarianship tend to have positive feelings about us, and I don't mean just like when I went to a party at the home of a sound designer and an actor, and all their theater world guests were totally charmed to hear I was a librarian. When I was at a planning meeting of the opposition before the 2004 Republican National Convention in New York City, I introduced myself as a librarian, and mine was the only introduction that got any reaction—applause—from the crowd. The challenge is how to channel this often fuzzy goodwill from activists and mainstream society alike into stronger support for public spaces, open access scholarship, open technological platforms, high-quality research instruction, preservation of marginalized communities' heritage, and other information issues that fall into our purview.

So what defines a radical librarian—an informed agitator, if you will, who wants to create other informed agitators? Public librarian Ann Sparanese (2008) has described her growing commitment to serving her entire New Jersey community, which led to vigorous collection development, grantwriting, and other undertakings: “With each new project, the idea of library activism—in this case, the idea of community outreach and service—informed my work. Although it seems so obvious to me and maybe it does to you too, you would be amazed at how it often just is not done” (p. 74). And in a seminal text in radical librarianship, the collection *Revolting Librarians*, Celeste West (1972) argued that some type of library activism is in fact a foundation for being a good professional: “True professionalism implies evolution, if not revolution; those who ‘profess’ a calling have certain goals and standards for improving existence, which necessarily means moving, shaking, transforming it” (p. [i]).

When I, a public librarian, demonstrate how to attach a resume to an email message, someone's existence is improved. But I wouldn't call that much of a movement or a transformation. Indeed, a lot of what I do at work is pretty quotidian. But I'm never unaware of the big picture—the “free”¹ resources, both material and intangible, that assist people going through major life changes of all sorts; the opportunities for community members to be teachers and creators as well as students and cultural consumers; and, overall, the environment of learning, self-actualization, and even caring (for oneself and also for other library users). Some of these elements are at the heart of any library, and others I deliberately bring in, for example enabling patrons and friends to lead workshops on subjects they're knowledgeable about. Outside of my job, too, I know that showing someone how to use the top level domain limiter in Google's advanced

1. Scare quotes because of the tax money involved.

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search is not in and of itself a political act. But doing it for a working group of Occupy Wall Street, as part of a training on strategic business research, is another story. Context and vision matter.

I'm leery of getting too caught up in definitions. There is great fun and great value that come from being part of that community of self-selecting "radical" librarians. But I also think about the non-self-selectors, who make up the bulk of our colleagues and neighbors and include other smart, dedicated folks who question authority and try innovative things in the service of their publics (but may not call themselves activists). How do we take our political insights and use them in the workplace and beyond to speak truth to power, to push for rigorous thinking on policies, to address systemic inequalities, to improve service to *all* of our users? Activist and academic Chris Dixon expresses what some organizers on the left are grappling with generally: "From my perspective, [the] challenge is to move beyond self-selected radical scenes, and build broad-based movements rooted in the lives and struggles of ordinary, non-activist people. [...] We have to build alliances across differences" in hierarchies of race, class, gender, sexuality, citizenship, and ability (Soong, 2013). We know that those "ordinary, non-activist people" are in our classes, in our workrooms, at our reference desks, in our towns and cities. Unlike other activists who may spend the bulk of their time in radical silos, we are fortunate enough to be part of heterogeneous communities. What does alliance-building in the service of justice and equality in a library context look like?

Which brings us to this book. It follows such collections as *Activism in American Librarianship, 1962-1973*; *Revolting Librarians*; and *Revolting Librarians Redux*, which brought out some of the progressive voices and activist histories of the library sphere. As such, one of *Informed Agitation's* goals is to serve as documentation of a particular moment in the timeline of librarianship and social movements. It's also a moment when the tumultuous shifts in the publishing world and the ever-evolving online environment have made discussion of libraries' and librarians' "relevance" increasingly pronounced, and when austerity measures in the public sector, higher education, and elsewhere are strangling the future of library work itself. The essays here are also articulations of library activism outside of significant associations such as the Social Responsibilities Round Table of ALA and the Progressive Librarians Guild.

You'll encounter librarians who are fighting against the fears that lead us to hide behind so-called neutrality, "bringing us full circle back to our roots, as servants to power" (Harger, 2010, p. 62). The people in this book are fighting *against* the fear of ruffling the feathers of managers and colleagues, the fear of subsuming their identities to mainstream "3x5" library culture, the fear of taking to the streets in protest. They are struggling against the idea that neutrality

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covers all aspects of our work equally. They are also wrestling with the ideals, not always realized, of autonomy from institutional control—a key theme in grassroots activism of all kinds.

Several chapters are about archives, perhaps reflecting the ease with which this area of librarianship lends itself to social movement work. What better way to support marginalized communities than to document and preserve their materials and (in some cases literally) their voices? Other chapters address the importance of physical venues in which people gather, from the neighborhood public library branch (a site of multicultural, intergenerational, cross-class interactions) to explicitly radical spaces. You'll also read about ecological sustainability and one role for information workers in this area; identity and setting boundaries to "community"; librarians' responsibility to international solidarity; personal histories; digitization; prisons; healthcare; Occupy Wall Street; and, of course, information literacy, zines, and other issues related to instruction and collections.

And what's in your hands is just part of it all. Librarians (and others!) are out there being activists with data, literature, archives, instruction, and more. DuckDuckGo it. Talk to your favorite librarian over tea or beer about information work in social movements. Discuss some of the other important and contentious topics in our field, such as e-books and digital rights management; privacy concerns, from government surveillance of patrons' borrowing records to "Big Data"; threats to net neutrality; unequal access to broadband Internet; copyright and open access; legislative efforts to restrict online activity; labor struggles in library workplaces; and the state of library and information science education. Look at organizations and projects in your area that could use some experienced research assistance. Make a resource guide about something that affects you personally and distribute it around your city. As Bathurst (2011) says, "The great untold truth of libraries is that people need them not because they're about study and solitude, but because they're about connection." And making a connection can be the start of something that transforms the world.

~Melissa Morrone

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