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November 8, 2016: Core Values, Bad Faith, and Democracy

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ABSTRACT

Core values of librarianship are being fundamentally challenged and have been for some time. It is a time for reflection on and clarification of them because how they are understood, communicated, and accomplished in light of November 8, 2016, calls for it. The recent election is just a manifestation of political, social, economic, and cultural shifts under way for some time that brought the disjunctures of how we approach and understand our core values to the surface. Essentially, we are playing out very old tropes in the profession by casting our values as neutral, instrumental, and technocratic—playing directly to the impulses of our neoliberal age and distorting core values.

I t is a time for reflection and clarification in our field: core values of librarianship are being fundamentally challenged and have been for some time. No new set of values will be forwarded here, nor a novel interpretation; the American Library Association (ALA 2004) has adequately consolidated an expression of them in a list linked to the wide variety of policies on the books.[1] Rather, it is how these are understood, communicated, and accomplished in light of November 8, 2016, that calls for clarification. The recent election is the most recent manifestation of the political, social, economic, and cultural shifts under way for some time with which a learned profession—if it deserves the name—must grapple. The task here is to highlight a fundamental and disturbing shift that the election brought to the surface and its disjuncture with how we approach and understand our core values.

To begin, a ready illustration can be found in a recent "interrogation" of the core values list wherein some were found to be "fundamental," some "subordinate," and some "questionable" (Anderson 2013).[2] At the very top of this pyramid is access ("about as fundamental as a library principle can get"), which then colored two other fundamental values, intellectual freedom

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1. They are access, confidentiality and privacy, democracy, diversity, education and lifelong learning, intellectual freedom, preservation, the public good, professionalism, service, and social responsibility. In turn, they are linked to professional ethics and competencies (ALA 2014).

2. This is not just flotsam from the Internet: it is sponsored by a venerable and important publication in the field and written by an administrator of an ARL library. Such sponsored web platforms, when treated as neutral spaces for exchange, present substantive problems for the field: see "John Buschman's Letter to Library Journal: 'Library Journal Supports the Annoyed Librarian but Ends Críticas,'" *Anime World* blog, January 28, 2009, http://uchiha-readme.blogspot.com /2009/02/john-buschmans-letter-to-library.html.

("how and why we impose structure on access") and service ("A library without service is nothing but a collection of documents sitting in a building"; Anderson 2013). Subordinate values then feed into this access-driven view: Confidentiality, and privacy, "protects intellectual freedom," diversity "helps ensure equitable access," professionalism "should characterize our services," and preservation "ensure[s] continued access" (Anderson 2013). The questionable remaining core values are "certainly not bad or wrong in and of themselves, but troublesome in . . . their real-world application . . . or [in] conflict with other values": education and lifelong learning are potentially wasteful and expensive to support mere leisure, democracy is support for "one particular political and social philosophy" and prejudicial to antidemocratic users, social responsibility is unworkable amid diversity of opinion, and the public good is "purely subjective . . . a truly diverse profession will inevitably disagree on what best serves the public good" (Anderson 2013).

Professional Tropes

Anderson's (2013) interrogation is simply a selection from what ALA states about a value and then a hierarchical schematization, and it serves here as a stand-in for a broader pattern of how we have understood—and still understand and express—our core values. In so doing, the interrogation projects updated versions of two very old tropes of librarianship:

- Trope 1: Useful knowledge and the information paradigm. Wiegand (2015) documents the longstanding librarian bias for "useful knowledge"—that is, books and information relevant to paid work and public affairs, and the correlative educational connection of the library to economic opportunity. As a result, librarianship was long characterized as relentlessly practical and crudely positivist by default: "the librarian appeared to stand alone in the 'simplicity of his pragmatism: a rationalization of each immediate technical process by itself' was challenge enough" (Harris 1972, 29). This bias fed a valorization of new information technologies, which led to projections of the demise of libraries and "prioritized the information that capitalism thought useful by making it all more accessible" (Wiegand 2015, 351).
- Trope 2: Neutrality. If a bias for useful knowledge led to our technologically mediated information paradigm, this in turn reinforced neutrality. The idea of technology as a merely neutral tool for access to information dovetailed with the "idea of a rational, unbiased actor in [the library] profession" presented "as an act of service to patrons" (Jaeger et al. 2013, 370) that avoided controversy and (neutrally) promoted intellectual freedom. The problems of neutrality—including its apolitical (almost amoral) pallidness—and the very real difficulties in actually achieving it in a meaningful way (versus striking a neutral pose for effect or convenience) are legion (Jaeger et al. 2013), but it is prominent nonetheless.

It isn't difficult to see in the core-values schema above how these tropes are currently played out. Essentially, access has been valorized to characterize and color some core values and to question others. This is a vision of technologically mediated, neutral access to useful (versus wasteful leisure) information resources. Values entailing disagreement or diversity of opinion (defined as controversial and therefore tout court nonneutral and off limits) are relegated to the realm of the subjective, unrealistic, or unattainable—and thus could not be core values. It is, in short, a technocratic and neoliberal vision of librarianship's core values (Buschman 2003a, 2012). November 8, 2016, highlighted the problems with this approach and the need for clarification.

The Recent Campaign and Election—and Libraries

Despite fashionable posturing about choices among Tweedledum and Tweedledee, elections have consequences. November 8, 2016—and the campaign that preceded it—presents disturbing implications at cross purposes with all but the most casuistic reading of the field's values. Offering library services and collections that respect the dignity of women, people of color, diverse religions and ethnicities, the poor, and diversity of public exchange will take place in a different environment as a result of the discourse of—and enabled by—this campaign and the aftermath of the election. The resulting policy environment will likely emphasize some combination of higher-income tax cuts to stimulate investment, privatization of public services, environmental deregulation, a deemphasis of climate change, changes to the social safety net (health care insurance, family leave, Social Security), and financial deregulation (Krugman 2016a, 2016b). It is difficult to see how a technocratic and neoliberal vision of librarianship's core values could meaningfully address library users' needs within this environment. "Access" means very little to people who are already economically struggling for a foothold, or who have had a fundamental piece of their personhood now made controversial (Burns, Haberman, and Parker 2016; Dickerson 2016; Fausset, Blinder, and Eligon 2016; Goldstein 2016; Krugman 2016b; Lee and Quealy 2016; Reilly 2016; Shalby 2016). To circle back to the core values interrogation, the neat schema has been reshuffled: questionable, fundamental, and subordinate values are now swept up together in the aftermath of November 8, 2016. Diversity, social responsibility, privacy, the public good, and intellectual freedom (Borchers 2016) are now very much subject to a diversity of opinion and thus are all controversial or nonneutral and should not be core by the logic of the interrogation and librarianship's tropes. As an explanation or an identification of the essential qualities of librarianship's core values, this approach has grave limitations.

The problem is that the core-values list is treated as a mere grouping of words into which any number of meanings can be read and onto which any given hierarchy can be imposed, ignoring the values' context. There are reasons why this list was chosen as core. If one bothers to read even a bit of the nonboldface text, a context emerges. Words, phrases, and clauses such

as "First Amendment," "social responsibilities," "citizenry," "right," "educate," "freedom," "community," "constitutionally," "critical issues," "publically supported," "equal," "equitably," "government," "democratic societies," "social needs," and "examine . . . facts regarding each problem" (ALA 2004) are shot through it. References and links are made to the Library Bill of Rights and Freedom to Read statements—self-consciously evoking democratic constitutional rights and contexts. The implication is obvious: this list and this inflection of meaning are meant to support the democratic society from which they sprang. The contention that librarianship's core values should be neutral and instrumental in their execution, that favoring one particular political and social philosophy is improper and controversial, is risible. That a state and a society have an inherent interest in fostering a way of life and institutions and social arrangements that sustain and perpetuate them is a principle known as long as there have been politics: "The citizen should be moulded to suit the form of government," and the "neglect of education does harm to the constitution" (Aristotle 1947, 621) of society. That libraries and librarians' professional practices can be—and have been—used for different social and political purposes historically does not mean they have no relationship to the purposes they are put to in a democratic society.[3]

Librarianship's core values share a broad consensus with many related fields.[4] At the center of that overlap is a concept of verifiability—that some information can (and some cannot) be verified, that this does not depend on who is doing the verifying, that this is based on evidence, and that the way to foster verification is to organize information for easy and accurate access (Fallis 2004). In other words, however fallible and revisable, librarianship works off the proposition that there is more-true information, there is value in finding it, knowing it, and acting on it.[5] This is a concept very closely linked to the development and health of democracy (Habermas 1989) and the development of education and libraries in democracies (Buschman 2003a, 2012). The profession's core values are not neutral instruments for just any goals. They are an articulation of some of the conditions of equality (Dahl 2006) necessary to sustain and protect democratic society: equal access, privacy for intellectual freedom, an educated and informed citizenry, free expression, diversity, the commonweal, preservation of the historical record, service professionalism to meet social needs, and social responsibility.

3. Mathiesen and Fallis (2008) explicate this specifically in terms of access: "the role of the librarian is to provide access . . . depending on the goal of such access" (221); "we . . . shape the access [because] people do not typically just want or need any old information" (224); "the neutrality of the librarian [is] something like a referee's neutrality [who] is neutral with regard to the teams . . . [and] not neutral with regard to the rules of the game [as] a partisan and defender of the rules" (228). The rules, of course, are determined by the goals of access: social and political arrangements to sustain and perpetuate democratic society.

4. The concept of an overlapping consensus is from Rawls (2005). See Buschman (2016, 420) for a list of sources that illustrate the overlap differing fields and perspectives, and Mathiesen and Fallis (2008) and Fallis (2004).

5. Not for librarianship are the various postmodern propositions that what is true simply represents unstable meanings, shifting rhetorical strategies, rivalrous narratives, and a particular view, identity, or vantage point (Sarup 1993).

We now arrive at why November 8, 2016, and the campaign that preceded it are so very disturbing for the field: they have so enshrined untruth—lies—that Oxford Dictionaries named "post-truth" its word of the year (Wang 2016). The examples beyond this meager selection are legion (Cillizza 2016; Dale and Talaga 2016; Kessler 2016; Lauter 2016; New York Times Editorial Board 2016):

- That thousands of Muslims in New Jersey celebrated the fall of the Twin Towers on 9/11
- That real unemployment was 42% in 2015
- That Ted Cruz's father was linked to Lee Harvey Oswald
- That President Obama was not legitimately a citizen
- That the Obama administration supported terror groups
- That a reporter's disability was not mimicked and mocked
- That denigrating comments were not made about women
- That the outcome was a popular vote landslide for the Electoral College winner

This went so far that a vice presidential candidate flatly denied a number of statements recorded, tweeted, or written by his presidential candidate—including the signature campaign policy of deporting immigrants (Cohen 2016). "Fake news" has become both standard and a serious problem for journalists (Lynch 2016)—and many supporters of the Electoral College winner simply don't care (Ignatius 2016; Sullivan 2016). Facts don't sway.

Librarianship: Why Bad Faith?

Beyond the self-serving worries of the media about these developments, they present a fundamental challenge to the values of librarianship. They call for the clarification of our values and a reckoning for bad faith: self-deception, inauthenticity, evading responsibility, hypocrisy in conduct, or unreasonable interpretations of evidence (Martin 1999). To give one example, much fact-checking was (finally) done during the recent election by the media (after long enabling false and outrageous claims to capture audiences), and this would seem to dovetail well with the commonly understood values and practices of librarianship. Rather, it is a version of our values filtered through our tropes and the interrogation: fact-checking tends to imply mere access; a neutral true-false dichotomy that denatures and decontextualizes what is being checked; it implies an instrumental application of rules and searches to the fact or nonfact at hand; it implies a "balance" between the "sides" of an "issue" and the facts; all of this is greatly enhanced by the media and the web making lies (e.g., the Muslim celebration of 9/11) "harmless" or "urban legends" (Buschman 2003b). Thus a context posited by fact checking is so demonstrably false that library instrumentality and neutrality in this case would serve to mask the full meaning of verified and verifiable fact or falsehood (as the media did during most of the campaign). The "sides" were nowhere near equal on the true–untrue spectrum. To imply

a side or a spectrum at all is itself misleading. In light of November 8, 2016, a neoliberal, instrumental, and neutral understanding of our core values constitutes bad faith unresponsive to the scale and nature of events.

But the situation goes much further. In the teeth of so much untruth (and the resulting policy trajectories) that cuts away at the goals of our core values, into the postelection environment stepped the ALA in the form of a press release "posted in error" that "show[s] how libraries support policy priorities of [the] new administration."[6] Another press release offered "expertise and resources to the incoming administration" in finding common policy ground. There a nonretraction and explanation appeared approximately a week later that expressed regret about the way the original press release was publicized and received. Documents were taken down from the web (the image of the document was captured and reposted), and a retraction of the original press release was issued in the end with a statement of the need to "fight to advance our core values" after another week and a continuing storm of protest. In the process, the neoliberal and corporate nature and structure of the ALA was laid bare in the form of differences in interests, policy, direction, and process between a permanent professional staff and executive structure, a Washington, DC, government relations (lobbying) office, and the independence of both from elected leadership who (ostensibly) set policy in a putatively democratic professional association. The bad faith in the form of the number of core values violated (access, democracy, preservation, intellectual freedom, professionalism, the public good, diversity) by the very association that promulgated them during this whole process was dizzying. And it was done all in the name of logrolling with a new administration, the election of which has done so much to further undercut core values of librarianship and democracy.

Conclusion: Democracy and November 8, 2016

Habermas (1985) has told us we've been on this path for some time now: "We are witnessing an increasing substitution of images for words, and also that inter-mingling of categories such as advertising, politics, entertainment [and] information . . . promot[ing] the neon-lit re-

6. This passage links to copies of rescinded documents and subsequent noted facts: "Open Letter to ALA President Julie Todaro re: Recent ALA Statements," *Librarian in Black* (blog), November 20, 2016, http://librarianinblack.net /librarianinblack/alastatements/; "ALA Offers Expertise, Resources to Incoming Administration and Congress" (press release), Wayback Machine Internet Archive, https://web.archive.org/web/20161119133324/http://www.ala.org/news/press -releases/2016/11/ala-offers-expertise-resources-incoming-administration-and-congress; Julie B. Todaro, "A Message to Members," *American Libraries*, November 21, 2016, https://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/blogs/the-scoop/a-message-to -members/; "ALA President Responds to Member Concerns on New Administration" (press release), American Library Association, December 6, 2016, http://www.ala.org/news/press-releases/2016/12/ala-president-responds-member-concerns -new-administration; "ALA President Responds to Concerns from Members about Press Release Regarding Library Priorities and the New Administration" (press release), American Library Association, November 19, 2016, http://www.ala.org /news/press-releases/2016/11/ala-president-responds-concerns-members-about-press-release-regarding-library; Rory Litwin, "The ALA Washington Office Press Releases and Todaro's Monday Morning Misdirection (#NotMyALA)," *Library Juice* (blog), November 21, 2016, http://libraryjuicepress.com/blog/?p=5429.

enchantment of a de-realized reality. The banal coalesces with the unreal [and] de-differentiated customs blend with high-tech style, and the ruins of popular cultures with the highly personalized, consumeristically polished bizarre" (97).

This, as much as anything written recently, captures the recent election while the social and political depredations of neoliberalism are masked at the same time (Habermas 2015). The *longue durée* of neoliberalism has made it "ingrained in our public life and discourse" while there is "widespread discontent with the results [by a] public that has not reckoned with the economic, social, technological, and political forces that have been unleashed . . . the arguments [for] which they putatively agree" (Buschman 2017, 12) and support politically to their cost (Frank 2004). A meditation on the election captured some of the resulting disconnect between neoliberalism, our shallow understanding of core values, the resulting library practices, and the recent election:

> For decades, the nice and the good have been talking to each other . . . ignoring what stews beneath: envy, anger, lust. [T]he *bien-pensants* put their fingers in their ears and smiled. . . . They thought we had outgrown the deadly sins . . . [that] we were rational sophisticates who could defer gratification. They thought they had a majority, and they screened out the roaring from . . . outside their gates, or, if they heard it, they thought they could silence it with . . . a little quantitative easing, a package of special measures. Primal dreads have gone unacknowledged. It is not only . . . crude blustering . . . that has poisoned public discourse but the liberals' indulgence of the marginal and the whimsical, the habit of letting lies pass, of ignoring the living truth . . . as if by not speaking of our grosser aspects we abolish them. It is a failure of the imagination. (Mantel 2016, 52)

It is no secret that that democracy survives and thrives in broadly prosperous societies and that wide economic inequalities in turn produce political inequalities and damage democracy (Lipset 2003; Dahl 2006). November 8, 2016, brought the underside of neoliberal developments and our self-contained media-technology bubbles—and our profession's bad faith—into full view.

Am I suggesting that librarianship can and should lead us out of the political wilderness to a more democratic, just, equitable, respectful, rational, and diverse society? No, but a learned profession that deserves the name should know, understand, promulgate, and act on its core values in a meaningful and mature way. That includes a perspective on the society in which we operate—its economic, political, and social trajectories for good or ill. Our core values are about democracy and the conditions of equality. We must reclaim some vision of what we're aiming for or the enterprise will flounder—as it has. Far too much consideration in taking positions and actions is given to keeping the institution and the profession thought of as

neutral and benignly helpful in the hopes of augmenting funding or warding off cuts. It is, in other words, about us and not the society we serve—in true neoliberal fashion (Budd 1997; Buschman 2003a, 2012). If we don't know where north is on our ethical compass, how can we possibly help the society we purport to help in our value statements? Habermas (1966) again provides us with a place to start: "only in an emancipated society, which had realized the autonomy of its members, would communication have developed into that free dialogue of all with all which we always hold up as the very paradigm of a mutually formed self-identity, as well as the ideal of true consensus" (297). That ideal will likely never be reached, but libraries should not play a bad-faith role in democratic society counter to it.

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