

Solidarity is a Two Way Street

Thank you for inviting me to speak to you today. I should begin by saying that I am not here as an expert with a set of solutions... I am not a lawyer, a professor or someone with a long history with the unions or the associations. I am just a front line librarian who apparently opens her mouth too much ... and gets herself into bad situations like this one... and so I just want to offer some observations and identify some emerging questions for you to think about, as we stand on the brink of this particular historical precipice. My co-panelists are going to speak more specifically about faculty associations, professional associations, and education for librarians.

So let me begin here: when I look to both the present and the future I find it impossible to ignore the simple fact that **while libraries are struggling to survive, academic librarians are in a full-on crisis. I think it's time to stop asking the question of crisis or opportunity – sometimes a crisis is just a crisis as one of my colleagues likes to say.**

Hyperbole? -- well by crisis I mean not only the usual complaints that Google has challenged us, or that we have no authority within the university, or that our professional status is being challenged and even actively undermined in some cases, or that permanent positions with academic freedom seem harder and harder to come by. No, if that weren't worrisome enough, I mean to say that we ourselves, internally, are suffering from an identity crisis. Frankly we are all over the place. Every time I go out with a different group of librarians I am struck by how they have an entirely different discourse, agenda and set of concerns than the last group I was with. How everybody seems to be pointing at someone else as the cause... the bunheads, the techies, the vendors, the administrators. We are diverse lot and in some ways are rapidly diversifying.

There are very few people able to straddle the various divides and expertises of cataloguing, public services, digital initiatives, liaison and teaching etc.

I don't think this diversity is a bad thing in itself – I think this sort of diversity is necessary in the 21st century library. However I do think we need to reaffirm some of our core values and principles, as I worry they grow weaker and weaker each day at a precarious time when we need to be ON MESSAGE. And I think we need associations and schools to bolster and affirm that message and use their channels to disseminate and advocate for us as a professional body.

I also fully believe that diminishing, undermining and cutting our librarians diminishes our libraries, that we are inextricably bound to each other and what hurts us hurts the Library too.

So we need to do a better job of defining and articulating our roles and values and what we offer society. When we speak about saving libraries – we also need to talk about saving librarians. Why the labour of librarians matter to libraries, why good libraries can't exist without librarians. This is what is so troubling about recent statements from our national association, which may not be a professional association to be sure – but the fact that it refuses to acknowledge that advocacy in support of librarians is good for libraries as a whole makes it clear that the folks currently running the association do not see our value and therefore do not speak for us or even particularly well for libraries. Good libraries need good librarians. You cannot disintermediate the two. We will need, of course, to prove this point and then repeat it til we are blue in the face at every opportunity, personal or political. For, let there be no doubt, we are under siege.

Furthermore, when we talk about saving librarians we need to talk about it in terms that resonate with other members of the public sector. Which is to say that we recognize that we are embroiled in **a shared struggle** across our entire sector for job security and against the casualization of labour. And while I personally have no problem with protecting jobs of any kind (I sort of thought employment was supposed to be a good thing for the economy), we will of course need to explain why over-reliance upon casual precarious labour actually negatively impacts library users and our local communities.

But let's get to some questions... that I think many of us have been asking ourselves and which speak to the importance of solidarity building:

1) What are librarians? What defines us? How to move beyond credentialism?

I think what defines us is not our degree but our Core Values and Principles: specifically the things we are generally advocate for as a profession - knowledge, sharing, common space, freedom of expression. These seem to be simple things, but as Naomi Klein told us years ago at the ALA - these values are the ones most under threat in today's globalized neoliberal society.

John Raulston Saul, Naomi Klein, Brewster Kahle... many thinkers from outside our profession have asked us to defend those values and wear our public-ness like a suit of armour. To resist the commodification of information and the locking down of public space. Klein tells us librarianship is, or should be, a revolutionary choice.

It is my view that we need to recentralize values and principles and ethics as the core of our professional identity. I find the claims for our exceptional expertise to ring a bit hollow to be honest, but what I notice to be unique and important about many of the people drawn to librarianship, and to public and academic librarianship in particular, is their commitment to these core values. I think most of us were called, and we have a calling -- to protect and preserve those values as formats change, and technology shifts and neoliberalism weaves its inexorable tentacles around our institutions of higher learning. I think we ignore this calling, and our societal role, at our professional and personal and social peril. To steal language from another profession – we have a duty of care. We have a civic responsibility. Our social responsibility is what defines us. There may well be others who share our concerns, but we are the only ones funded by the public to preserve and protect these values.

If we can agree to define ourselves in this way, we demonstrate that advocating for and building solidarity with and among librarians is about more than protecting jobs (although that's ok too in my opinion) but part of the larger struggle for social justice.

2) But come on... other people share these values, certainly a well-educated post doc (for instance) with a passion for libraries would be no different than a librarian, and s/he has the value of significant subject background.

I find it hard to defend our degrees, someday, I really do – and perhaps Sam can speak later to how/whether library schools are preparing people who are unique and essential to libraries or

not. But I also think this issue of which degree is needed is a divisive red herring. It's not us and them it's us and us – we are all academic labour. We need to see the forest amongst the trees - the **problem is not the post-docs, it's the casualization of labour, precariousness and the resulting loss of academic freedom.** Maybe you can run a good library without credentialed librarians, but can you run one with a revolving door of staff who do not have academic freedom and an interest in how the entire library is operating? It may be seductive to certain administrators to run a one-man show, with little to no resistance or challenge - but it is in fact the professional debate, our annoying resistance that makes for more rationalized, well-thought out and humane decisions in libraries. We slow things down, it is true, change happens slowly when librarians are around. I'm not so sure this is always a bad thing. It is our job to act as cultural stewards isn't it? To move cautiously with long-term preservation always on our minds and in so doing act as a bulwark against creeping techno-managerialism and corporatization of higher education?

3) Why do librarians need academic freedom? How many of us even use it?

Admittedly as the country's first federally funded feminist porn librarian this issue resonates with me perhaps more than most. However, I know librarians need academic freedom in order to do their jobs well – whether it's to acquire controversial material or to challenge an administrator's decision, or to operate as equals in the classroom with faculty members or to argue for open source technologies with the university CIO – the entire university community benefits from us being able to freely go about our business. Professor Toni Samek has argued that librarians need academic freedom more than other professions, because as cultural stewards we have a responsibility to acquire the materials that are outside the scope of mainstream channels and

because if we take the value of sharing quite seriously we are necessarily in positions of conflict with government and industry interests. Our often invisible conflict in many ways makes academic work possible. I find myself surprised, however, how frightened we are to actually use it.

3) Going back to the question of libraries vs librarians, in the current debate about the CLA a librarian blogger recently made the point that libraries do not exist to employ librarians.

It has been said that libraries do not exist to employ librarians. How can one disagree with such a statement? It seems so obvious, so common sensical yes? But let me ask another question – could good libraries exist without the labour of librarians, library technicians and library administrators? Is it not our collective labour that builds, organizes and animates print and digital collections? Who else has a primary responsibility to foster information literacy in our communities? Who negotiated the transition to online environments in scholarly research settings? Who also argues about copyright, fights for open access, and integrates open source technologies into higher education environments -all within a context of librarianly values of freedom of information and expression? The collections themselves are built on the back of academic labour, the blood sweat and tears of our faculty colleagues who write articles and books and in so doing advance the scholarly conversation, and they count on us to cultivate, curate, and preserve the historical record. Libraries are the product of labour of many kinds, they do not mysteriously appear one day in the middle of a campus fully formed. Libraries exist for our users, yes. But libraries exist because of its workers. Libraries exist because we do.

5) Ok so we've talked about the threats and how we might define ourselves better around a coherent centre, which would allow us to build more unity amongst us and tell a better story about our work to others. But what about this word “solidarity” – what is it.... how is it different from advocacy?

I define it as a two way street. It's a joining of hands. A recognition that our value is determined not only by how good we are as librarians, but how good we are ourselves as allies – this is how we build credibility. Francesca and Sam I suspect will talk a bit more about how we build solidarity amongst ourselves and on campus – I want to talk about building solidarity with the public (aka our users) and the public sector at large... the other unions, activist communities, political organizations etc.

from wikipedia...

Solidarity is the integration, and degree and type of integration, shown by a society or group with people and their neighbors. It refers to the ties in a society that bind people to one another.

The OED offers a similar definition but provides this as well: “A form of obligation involving joint and several responsibilities or rights.”

I liked these definitions because I think I often forget the responsibilities side of solidarity. I tend to think of it only in terms of telling our stories to the right people at the right time and forging alliances with them in order to gain their support for our cause. This is certainly how library advocacy is pitched at most conferences and institutes – always be ready for your elevator pitch!

But indeed solidarity, unlike advocacy, requires the recognition that we have ties that bind, that we have common cause, and that our allies need us as much as we need them. We need to recognize the struggles most related to our own, and figure out how to embed ourselves and help – whether it's just with our presence, whether it's through offering street reference, building activist libraries, writing letters, signing petitions whatever it takes.

In so doing we are doing what we have always done and are charged to do – fight for knowledge, sharing and common space.

In so doing, we demonstrate our role and usefulness better than any elevator pitch.

In so doing, we make common cause with citizens, we build grassroots support, we develop a wider horizon upon which we gain perspective on our struggle, and we begin to be part of social and political change. As librarians should.

So let me give examples of things we should stand in solidarity with, both internally and externally... When librarians went out on strike at Western – how many of you wrote in support of them, or put your body on the line and went down to stand in solidarity with them? When your public librarian colleagues are under attack – how many of us were deputing at City Hall? When students went out on their day of action yesterday, did you stand with them in recognition that exorbitant tuition hikes make education inaccessible and/or unfairly difficult? When your sessional and contract faculty protest or strike ... are you on the picket line with them? When citizens were corralled in the streets of Toronto and held there in the pouring rain during the G20

for daring to protest – why weren't our library associations furiously standing up for freedom of expression, a value we supposedly hold dear? Who went out to donate time or books to the Occupy libraries?

Some of you did right? Some people saw the connection with library values and embedded yourselves in those struggles. It was so exciting and heartening to see. And we need to see more of it. Solidarity is not only about association work or campus partnerships although that is very important. It's also about the ties that bind us to our neighbours. And locally, look at how our neighbours, once they understood what libraries were protecting and what was at stake, rose up to protect TPL in Toronto. I can't be the only one who was moved and awed by the public support for libraries in the last few months.

Solidarity is a responsibility – a responsibility to know what's going on around us, to build relationships with people and help them, and sometimes to be able to articulate the value a librarian can bring to that struggle and to act.

It's a difficult time for librarians and for the public sector in general. I find in the darkest moments - when I question myself, my university, my unions, my associations, our governments – it is in those moments that I need to remind myself of our core values and to build solidarity the most. In the last year, I have been on several picket lines, rallies, all night city council meetings, and the Occupy camp. And I came away feeling revitalized and renewed. People have begun to mobilize. We must be the people's librarians.

Thank you.

References

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