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Final Essay Exam

Two Essential ALA Core Values

The two ALA core values that are most critical for the profession right now are Access and the Public Good. The amount of information available to our communities continues to grow and contribute to increasing both information overload and misinformation. Reputable information is often difficult to find or inaccessible due to paywalls, discoverability challenges, institutional and socio-cultural biases, and other impediments. These two complementary core values offer an antidote to this situation, and librarians have an essential role to play in helping their communities both find the information they need and make sense of it.

It is easy to feel an acute sense of the loss of a shared understanding of the public good these days. A screenshot of an old tweet by the user @_Amanda_Killian, whose account is no longer findable, has been circulating online recently and expresses this sentiment with these words: “Libraries literally aren’t just a place to obtain books for free. They’re one of the few public spaces left in our society where you’re allowed to exist without the expectation of spending money” (@AletheaKontis). Along the same lines, Shannon Mattern makes the case that libraries are essential social infrastructure (a public good), saying “Most people who use the [library] building are not going there just to read a book or watch a film; many of them probably do not have any definite purpose at all. They go just to be part of the community in the building” (Mattern). This recalls Jürgen Habermas’s notion of the public sphere, which Tufekçi interprets “as the location and place in which rational arguments about matters concerning the public, especially regarding issues of governance and the civics can take place, freed from constraints of

status and identity" (Tufekçi). Alstad and Curry state that "As a physical place, the public library exemplifies the public sphere" (11). Too much in our society is an individual's worth connected to the value they contribute to the economy, which determines their status and identity. By holding up the Public Good as a core value, librarians push back against this tide and play an essential societal role reminding people that their value is not determined by their net worth, family, or job and that their voices matter in the public sphere.

There are many ways of looking at the core value of Access, but the most important way right now is to continually critically examine the language we use to make the items in our collections accessible. This has long been an area of interest and discussion in LIS, but Olson's work makes it strikingly clear that our systems for organizing and naming our resources have a profound influence on "access to information outside of the cultural mainstream and about groups marginalized in our society" (640). In other words, access to information about topics outside of the cultural mainstream or about marginalized members of society often requires the use of harmful language. If libraries and librarians are to uphold their value that library resources "should be readily, equally, and equitably accessible to all library users," they must understand that responsible librarianship demands that its practitioners constantly seek ways to improve this situation ("Core Values of Librarianship."). It is essential to making the public sphere a welcoming place for all.

Libraries and Neutrality

As a straight, white, cisgender male, privately educated from my pre-kindergarten days through my undergraduate degree, it has always been the norm for me to view neutrality as the safe, comfortable default. This is because I am a member of dominant groups, and as Dempsey

states, “to be ‘neutral’ can actually mean to be aligned with dominant perspectives” (Dempsey). Neutrality can also connote harmlessness, and I believe harmlessness is an implicitly stated ideal for libraries and librarians. That is, librarians and library institutions do not wish to harm their patrons. They exist, after all, to help. However, assuming a so-called neutral or objective position can inadvertently harm library patrons who are not members of dominant groups. Libraries and librarians, even when they choose neutrality, are not neutral.

Adler and Harper state that “The very possibility of the idea of library neutrality exists because of the belief in the objectivity of library science. The cost of such framing is not only an erasure of discordant voices, but perhaps more important, a depoliticization of the library space” (57). When libraries choose neutrality, they non-neutrally erase discordant voices who, in some cases, are people who do not belong to dominant groups or hold dominant perspectives. Gibson, et al., more damningly frame “neutrality as a practice in structural oppression of marginalized groups, as it is characterized by disengagement from (as opposed to active engagement with) crises within communities of color” and go on to say that “choosing neutrality (or disengagement) in time of conflict is choosing to maintain status quo at the expense of one portion of a community” (754). Neutrality implies the absence of antagonism and conflict, but Seale, strikingly, says that “antagonism and conflict are what make democracy possible; a lack of dissent signifies the imposition of authoritarian order” (590). By this assessment, if librarians are to take seriously their core value of Democracy, they must reject neutrality outright.

That said, I do not take a rejection of neutrality to require that libraries and librarians take a position on the issue du jour or engage in partisanship. Rather, I borrow an operative word from Gibson et al.’s analysis: disengagement. If neutrality is disengagement, then a rejection of neutrality is engagement. Engagement does not immediately imply the taking of a position.

Instead, it asserts an expectation that engaged librarians will inform themselves and thus work to assist their patrons to inform themselves as well. This engagement, especially among librarians, as self-informing and continual reflection will necessarily lead to making the library a more equitable space. Rejection of neutrality does not entail a rejection of harmlessness, which may be better termed as safety. In fact, rejecting neutrality and embracing engagement demonstrate an endorsement of psychological, existential safety for all patrons, especially those who are members of marginalized groups.

Libraries and librarians are either actively not neutral or passively not neutral. Since libraries cannot be neutral, it is the responsibility of libraries and librarians to take the active route if they wish to uphold their professional values and serve their patrons to the best of their ability.

Information Services and Diverse Communities in a Global Society

Without communities, there are no libraries. As Lankes says, "All libraries, whether public or private, large or small, should be about communities, those they serve and are part of—that's just librarianship" (7). The same author goes on to say that "A community … is not limited to a community of citizens in a given geographical location" before enumerating examples of communities such as schools, universities, law firms, and professional groups (Lankes, 8-9). These are examples of what I will call micro-communities, but in our hyperconnected, always online world, librarians need to consider their membership in the macro-community that is global society if they are to fulfill what Lankes calls their mission: "to improve society through facilitating knowledge creation in their communities" (17).

One aspect of information services librarians must consider in a global society is mobility. Libraries and librarians certainly have a responsibility to serve their immediate community, be that the geographic area that their public library serves or the university community of which their academic library is a part. But they must also serve transient members of their communities. As Lehman states, "a library can communicate and engage with *visitors* [emphasis mine] and city citizens in real time" (417). In other words, when considering how best to serve their communities, librarians should be aware that patrons who walk through their doors of their institution may not be permanent members of their communities, but they still have a responsibility to ensure that their access to the library's resources is fair and equitable. This may mean being prepared to cross a language barrier or to alleviate unfamiliarity with the community in which their patrons find themselves.

More pressing, though, is confronting the responsibility librarians have to ensure access to the resources they steward to those whose access may be impeded by economic status, institutional or governmental policy, and other social determinants. This is especially important in the world of scholarly communication and academic libraries. Vast amounts of knowledge are created at research institutions, but those who might benefit from that knowledge may not know of its existence or, since that knowledge is often published in journals requiring expensive subscriptions to access it, may not have the means to access it due to the wrong institutional affiliation (or lack thereof). Wenzler views institutional cooperation as essential to his concept of the "collective collection" but notes that collaborating across institutional boundaries is challenging (184). Academic institutions may be competitors vying for scarce resources, so "bonds of reciprocal trust that allow groups to achieve collective ends" are harder to create (185).

Open Access (OA) publishing can be seen as both a way to navigate these challenges and solution that has muddied the waters. I will not discuss the practical aspects of implementing OA here, but I believe that it is based on important ideals, especially since it puts the needs of information seekers ahead of institutions. This fact seems to trouble Holley, who says "If the goal of 'completely free and unrestricted access' were to be achieved, this open access would remove one of the main reasons why academic libraries exist—to provide information resources to faculty and students that they could otherwise not afford" (236). Lankes's dictum that "As … communities … change, so, too, must librarianship" is a helpful response here. Librarians do not exist to prolong the lives of the institutions that employ them. They exist to serve their patrons, regardless of who they are or where they come from.

Reflection

Entering this program, I assumed that I would be spending most of my time on the technical ins-and-outs of librarianship, learning cataloging, classification, and other essential elements of knowledge organization. I thought that's what librarianship was. I am, however, so grateful that this class exposed me to the breadth of librarianship and focused especially on the human aspects of it. This class drives home the fact that librarianship is a service profession, and that those who enter it are responsible for holding themselves, their colleagues, their institutions, and their professional organizations to a high standard.

At first, I was skeptical that the debate surrounding whether librarians are professionals mattered; let's just do our jobs! Now, after experiencing the thorough examination of the ALA core values this class offers, I am convinced that professionalism is essential to the practice of good librarianship.

Some of the most challenging material in the course had to do with equity and library neutrality and objectivity. For example, when reading April Hathcock's blog post about scholarly communication, I found myself reacting somewhat negatively to some of her arguments, particularly about how "[w]e've taken our diseased local system of scholarly communication and made it global" (Hathcock). I asked questions in my notes like "how is it diseased?" and "concretely, what have the west and north done wrong?" It's not that I disagree with Hathcock. Rather, I was looking for more evidence to support her claims, and I realized that it is my responsibility to get myself up to speed on the topic and do the work necessary find that evidence.

Similarly, entering the program I conceived of libraries as safe, conflict-free, and neutral. In fact, that conception is part of what drew me to this program. I am delighted to have been relieved of that conception through this class. Certainly, as I stated in my earlier essay on libraries and neutrality, libraries are safe and neutral to me *because* I am a white man of some privilege and power. But the course material opened my eyes to the perspectives of those who are members of marginalized groups. Going forward, I feel certain that I will challenge myself and my colleagues to think critically whenever we conceive of "the public" as some monolithic group.

Along those lines, I think the main concepts I will carry forward with me as I finish my degree and begin my career have to do with critical cataloging. I am drawn to knowledge organization, cataloging, and classification because I am interested in how language is used to navigate the catalog and access resources available in collections. More than anything else from this course, I am grateful to be relieved of the notion that controlled vocabularies are objective. The Olson reading was eye-opening, and I feel certain that I will return to it. I pulled so many

quotations from it, but I think the most important one for me to remember will be “The controlled vocabulary dictated by Cutter is, then, representation in the terms of the majority” (642). I hope to always remind myself that as an information professional, my responsibility is not just to the majority, it is to everyone.

I am grateful for the challenge this course offered and I know that I will return to its material again and again during my degree and career.

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