

Let's Get Critical

Critical Librarianship as the Way Forward

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Recognizing that everything we do is necessarily political, critical librarianship rejects the notion that librarians can or should be unbiased, "neutral" stewards of information, and instead, calls on us to examine our own political, social, and historical biases, as well as those of our institutions, and how those biases impact our services, collections, databases, and approach to information literacy and instruction. This article provides an introduction to the core concepts of "critical librarianship" with a focus on critical information literacy, offers some examples of how it applies to mental health and substance use disorder librarianship in particular, and ends with some suggestions on how library and information specialists can "get critical."

Keywords

Critical librarianship, Information literacy, Diversity

The Influence of Stereotypes on Our Profession

Librarian stereotypes have been around as long as librarians have and have played an integral role in the shaping of our profession over time. When we think of librarian stereotypes, particularly in pop culture, the image that typically comes to mind is that of a very severe-looking woman. She is usually depicted as angry, shushing, rule bound. She is often depicted as unmarried, older, and white. The job this stereotypical librarian does is nothing terribly specialized: she stamps due

dates and reshelves books. This is how the public often perceives us.

We have been frustrated by these stereotypes for a long time. We insist that we are nice, we want to help, we do more than read books all day, etc. But these are actually pretty superficial interpretations of the impact of this stereotype on our field. The primary problem is not that the stereotype makes us seem unattractive and stern; it's that it is rooted in and perpetuates misogyny, impedes diversity in our profession, and also creates actual anxiety in our users that can prevent them from getting access to information that could

be helpful to them. It costs us, and it costs our communities.

The origins of this stereotype are important to be aware of because they directly impact so many aspects of modern librarianship. Dee Garrison, a women's historian at Rutgers who did a lot of research on working women in the 1970s, once wrote, "It is important that librarians assess the basic meaning of feminization and give precise attention to their early history, for the dominance of women is surely the prevailing factor in library education, the image of librarianship, and the professionalization of the field" (Garrison, 1972).

This stereotype has a lengthy history. The first female librarian, technically a library clerk, was hired in 1852 by the Boston Public Library. Just 26 years later, in 1878, two-thirds of American library workers were women, and by the 1920s, that figure had reached nearly 90% (Rubin, 2016). That number hasn't really changed much in the intervening century; it's about 80% nowadays (US Dept of Labor, 2017). Perhaps not surprisingly, most of the actual leadership at those libraries were men, but most of the staff that a library user encountered were women (Simon, 1994).

The stereotype shifted during this period of time, from 1852, when the first woman was hired, to the early 1900s, when the modern version took root. Librarians in the late 1800s were typically depicted as men, often dressed in black, and severe, academic, or bookish in appearance. By 1905, that image had changed to that of a "spinster," with all the related connotations that come along with that term.

Librarianship was one of the few careers of the era that was considered suitable for women, and as women began to dominate the field, the perception of the nature of library work began to shift away from academia to what is generally considered to be "women's work"

(Gaines, 2014). This is where the focus on service provision, listening skills, and caregiving came into play, and it was an expectation of women librarians in particular. As the perception of librarians continued to erode, so did the number of men who became librarians in the first place, feeding further into the feminization of the field (Mars, 2018). The men who did enter the profession were typically fast-tracked into management positions with higher salaries, while women remained at the lower levels of the hierarchy, positioned as cheap labor to help stabilize declining library budgets. In fact, male library directors "openly acknowledged the desirability of hiring talented women because they worked for half the pay" (Rubin, 2016).

Since that era, things have not improved much, and this is certainly reflected in modern librarian stereotypes. For example, consider the character of Mary in the 1946 holiday film *It's a Wonderful Life*. At the beginning of the film, Mary is a charming, beautiful, happy young woman in love with her husband George. Without George, however, in the alternate timeline, she is forced to become a spinster librarian. She wears glasses and drab colors, frowns all the time. And she is described by the narrator like this, "She's an old maid. She never married. . . She's just about to close up the library."

The 1980s brought us the librarian from *Ghostbusters*, a stern older woman who wears her hair in a bun and has a chain on her glasses, which she wears low on her nose so she can glare at patrons over them. And the modern era has given us Tammy on the sitcom *Parks and Recreation*, a librarian who has things like a big rubber stamp on her desk that just reads "NO" in giant letters. In one episode, she greets a library patron by announcing loudly to all who can hear that she owes \$3 in fines, something she knows without having to look it up first. When another patron doesn't have the money to pay for their fines, Tammy

shames them by loudly yelling out the title of the book they owe the money for, a book about sexuality.

The stereotype of librarians as lacking specialized skills is also problematic. Academic faculty, for example, tend not to see academic librarians as their peers, even if they have PhDs and do research. Librarians are mostly women, and academic faculty, especially tenured faculty, are still majority men (TIAA Institute, 2016). In 1994, Robert Ivey surveyed professors at Memphis State, where all the librarians had faculty status, and found that 90% of the professors surveyed did not believe the librarians were their academic equals, deserving of their faculty status, and were instead “professionals” or even “semi-professionals” (Ivey, 1994). Even if we achieve equal rank in the academic hierarchy, in other words, academic faculty do not see us as their peers.

Importantly, this stereotype has also been a major player in the overall lack of diversity in our field. The stereotypical librarian is a white woman. If you search the stock photo database Shutterstock for the word “librarian,” what you find is dozens upon dozens of images of white women of varying ages, and almost no people of color at all. This stereotype shows the public who is “supposed” to be a librarian, and what they are “supposed” to look like. In 2018, according to the Department of Labor, over 85% of librarians were white, with only 6.6% black or African American, 8.4% Hispanic or Latinx, and 4.7% Asian (US Dept of Labor, 2018).

All of these aspects of the librarian stereotype are tied to power structures that have worked for centuries to oppress various types of people, and there is a clear relationship between the representation and treatment of women, and the low status of the field in which we work.

Put all of this together, and what we have is a tremendous need for us to take a good, critical look at this stereotype and ourselves, and to begin trying to change our image, not simply because we want to be taken more seriously and retain our funding, but because by not pushing back on all of the elements that go into maintaining this stereotype, we are essentially contributing to systems that disadvantage students and other patrons and maintain harmful power structures in our libraries and institutions. It’s not the stereotype itself that is the problem, in other words; it’s everything that goes into that stereotype’s creation and persistence over time.

Critical Librarianship

Critical librarianship is a concept that has been increasingly entering discussions about the role of librarians in the modern era. It is the perfect way for us to start shaking loose from these stereotypes and begin to forge for ourselves a new role and identity that has the potential to greatly expand our ability to assist and serve our users.

Critical librarianship is an approach that turns a critical eye inward, on our institutions, our practices, and ourselves, and at the power structures within all those things. It incorporates social justice and applies critical theories, including race theory, genderqueer theory, feminist theory, and others, to question, examine, and challenge the status quo.

One of the long-standing traditions of our field that critical librarianship has especially focused on is the concept of “neutrality,” a concept usually described in these terms:

- Information in libraries is “free” for all users.

- No one is silenced because of their race, beliefs, gender, sexuality, or any other factor.
- And librarians, similar to journalists, are expected to serve as neutral conduits of information, presenting “all sides” of an issue and letting our users evaluate those sides for themselves.

D.J. Foskett in 1962 described this last tenet as part of the “creed of a librarian,” writing, “During reference service, the librarian ought virtually to vanish as an individual person. . .” (Foskett, 1962).

The problem with this notion is that while many of us take pride in these truths about libraries, none of these things are actually true about libraries. Information is not free for all, and marginalized people are silenced all the time in our institutions. In the case of the third one, it is not only impossible, but it may not necessarily be a good goal in the first place.

Consider as one example a librarian who is asked to provide information about the safety of vaccinations. Would we expect that librarian to provide “bias-free” information about things they knew to be factually incorrect (for example, a document inaccurately connecting vaccines to autism)? Taking it one step further, what about a librarian who is asked to provide information to support the argument that the Holocaust never happened? That information certainly exists, and “neutrality” would suggest that this librarian should simply provide the materials requested without comment, or at least provide materials arguing the opposite position in equal measure, as though the two “sides” warranted equal weight. Is that really something we want to hold up as a hallmark of our profession, however? Are we really serving our communities of users when we segregate our values and beliefs, not to mention actual facts, from our professional duties and “vanish as an individual person”?

Importantly, there is also nothing neutral about neutrality in the first place. Neutrality is taking a side – the side of the status quo. When you look at it that way, especially when you also consider the overall “whiteness” of our profession, it becomes evident fairly quickly just how much of the notion of librarian neutrality is rooted in and perpetuated by privilege.

Privilege is a term used to refer to unequal power relations that lead to one group profiting at the disadvantage of another, and it is often working behind the scenes without our being aware of it when we make all kinds of decisions and choices about our libraries and services. Consider:

- Our pedagogy, especially the way we teach information literacy: For example, librarians tend to believe that we are the experts on information literacy, and that our way is the only “correct” way to approach finding and vetting information, even as our knowledge of newer systems and skills begin to lag behind those of our users.
- Our materials: not just in terms of collections and book selection, although certainly there too, but also our websites and databases, which many times are designed without input from actual users because, again, we feel that we “know best” how to present information for all. Every decision we make related to materials, from acquisitions to organization, is a decision that effectively prioritizes one piece of information over another.
- Our services: for example, many academic libraries are open to the public, but we often do not actively market those services to the public because we do not consider them “appropriate” users of our resources.
- Our language and classification terms and hierarchies: Subject headings, for example, frequently assume academic vocabularies and Western ways of organizing or thinking about concepts.

Critical theory is how we can dig more deeply into all these things. It can be used to evaluate:

- Our education systems,
- Our positions in those systems,
- Our physical and digital spaces,
- What our library does,
- What we do in our library,
- How our information is organized,
- How it's shared, and
- How source authority is established.

It is through this evaluation, using the lens of empathy, social justice, and critical theory, that librarians can begin to transform their image and vastly improve their value to their communities.

Critical Information Literacy

In the past, one of our greatest roles as librarians, particularly special librarians, was to provide expert searching assistance for those seeking information. As professionals, we knew which databases to use, which sources were valid, and the best approaches to constructing queries, and we would put that knowledge to use, perform searches, and provide our users with curated results.

In the modern era, however, as information has increasingly been made available online, this role for librarians has dropped to the wayside. Our users have begun to do their own searches, and not always using the platforms or methods we would suggest. As our role as “helper” for information acquisition has dropped, however, our role as “educator” for information literacy has risen.

Information literacy is another aspect of our profession where the application of critical theory has the potential to greatly improve its effectiveness and value to our community.

Author and librarian Barbara Fister describes critical information literacy thusly:

In these days of mass surveillance and the massive transfer of public goods into private hands, citizens need to know much more about how information works. They need to understand the moral, economic, and political context of knowledge. (Fister, 2013)

Information literacy instruction in libraries, for example, has often been limited to simply teaching users what we believe to be the best or most reliable sources for valid information, and how to use those sources efficiently. For example, we say the best sources for information are:

- peer-reviewed journals, especially those with high impact factors;
- approved websites, such as those by professional societies or established institutions; and
- sanctioned, specialized databases such as PubMed and PsycINFO.

We teach a user how to search PubMed, show them how to access the articles they find there, and largely consider our work done.

But in order to truly evaluate information critically, one must go deeper than this. For example, we should also be teaching our users about the commodification of information in our society and the impact that has on what research gets published, not to mention what research gets funded in the first place. We should be telling our users about the flaws inherent in the peer review system, which is arguably a vitally important process, but inarguably a tremendously problematic one. We should also be telling our users about the similar issues with Wikipedia and Google Scholar, which are used a lot by the average person and can definitely be very helpful tools, but which suffer from a lot of bias and revenue-focused issues, just like everything else. How might we present these issues to our users?

For-profit publishing models

The for-profit publishing model is a highly problematic one. For-profit publishers are in publishing to make money, and to make money, they have to successfully compete with other publishers, and they have to win those competitions. That means they select articles to be published that they think will make them money, a determination they make based on a wide range of factors outside of simply whether or not the paper is reporting on valid and reliable science. This is not necessarily their fault – this is the nature of capitalism, the system we are all operating in. But it is important to recognize that before articles even get to the peer review process, they have been evaluated for other criteria, including their marketability and potential popularity. Articles that do not meet those criteria may not make it to the peer review stage in the first place. A human being makes those decisions, and that inherently makes them open to bias.

The private appropriation of public resources and information and the evolution of information into a commodity that is for sale has global ramifications because it offers opportunities for the censoring of science through private, third party interests. Academic publishers are now having to make decisions about what to publish more on the basis of the market and an article's potential as a commodity than on the basis of science.

Once the science does get published, for-profit publishing models then go to work keeping that science out of reach to all but the most privileged – people who have access to academic libraries, for example. For someone in a rural area not near a university or college? Their primary option for obtaining new research is paying \$54 for 24 hours of access to a single PDF of a single article – that is the going rate to rent an article for one day from *American Journal of Drug and Alcohol Abuse*. And that is only if they have the technology

needed to access that PDF, as well as the knowledge needed to find it in the first place.

Though digital technologies were supposed to have helped information transcend some of those boundaries, they haven't really done as much as we might have hoped they would in that regard. Not only are rural and urban areas in our individual countries, states, and regions still segregated, but the Global South is still very much isolated from the Global North because of economic and other factors.

Peer review

At the next level of gatekeeping, we have peer review. Once an article gets here, a whole additional set of issues come into play. A lot of people believe that if an article passed peer review, that means it is presenting sound science. But think of all the damage a single paper about autism and vaccines has caused; that was a peer-reviewed paper.

In one analysis of the efficacy of peer review, researchers found that the top 14 most-cited papers in medicine had been rejected by peer reviewers in the top 3 medical journals. (Siler, K., Lee, K., & Bero, L., 2015). There's also a famous economics paper, "The Market for Lemons" by George Akerlof, which was rejected, and quite harshly, by 3 of the top economics journals at the time, one of which described it as 'trivial' (Gans, J.S. & Shepherd, G.B., 1994). The paper finally got published in the *Quarterly Journal of Economics* (1970;84(3):488-500), went on to be one of the most influential papers in the field, and Akerlof eventually won the Nobel Prize for the work it reported on.

In April 2018, Times Higher Ed asked people on [Twitter](#) to post about the worst comments they'd ever heard from a peer reviewer. Dozens of people responded, describing incidents driven by misogyny, racism, and ableism:

"The male editor-in-chief said it wasn't the kind of thing the journal was interested in publishing, but that his wife would probably find it very interesting (it was a discursive study on femininity and family foodwork)." @drkaylouiseday

"Received very high praise for the manuscript, only to have the reviewer refer to me, the author, throughout as he/his. Probably didn't believe women could write about security..." @psephy

"I was told we can't publish your qualitative paper as there is no comparative white sample in your study..." @akileahmet1

"I was told that I clearly understood nothing about deafness." @safeandsilent (a deaf professor)

Peer review is done by busy, usually unpaid volunteers, who are mostly white and male (the same is true for people who edit Wikipedia pages), and bias and time constraints both come into play in that process. Peer reviewers are human beings, and they have all the same flaws the rest of us do – they just also have a lot of power as gatekeepers of science.

As librarians, we believe that information is a public good, and that everybody should have access to the information they need. But what are we doing to actually ensure that access for our users? We buy subscriptions to exorbitantly priced journals and databases that our users could never pay for themselves, and we offer those materials and systems to users who come into our buildings or somehow otherwise obtain our approval to access them, and that is often where we stop.

But does this really ensure equal access to information for all? Of course not. Not everybody can come to our physical library to access these journals and databases, and we

don't grant online access to them to just anybody, either. In an academic library, you typically have to be faculty, student, or staff to access materials from off-site. At the public library, you have to have a library card to access digital materials, which often requires proof of residency, something that can be a barrier for those experiencing challenges with housing.

The movement toward open access publishing was partly developed in an attempt to push back on this model. But open access comes with its own challenges. Some open access models are great and are contributing to the dismantling of these harmful systems by making information more available to the public, decentralizing it, and helping it transcend geographical boundaries. But for-profit publishing corporations are not just sitting back and letting that happen. Instead, they are putting out revenue-based models for open access that cause many of the same problems. If greater openness and transparency still leave the same power structures in place, then the open access movement is not achieving the goals of social equity that it set out to.

Why is it important that our users be aware of all these issues? Because the commodification of information has a dramatic impact on what science gets funded, what science gets published, which scientists get tenure, what science a student learns about, what science the public hears about, and what science policymakers hear about, which then takes us all the way back to funding, starting the whole cycle all over again. This repeats on and on, with decisions based on money at the core. Knowing about this is a vital part of information literacy.

Some ways librarians can enact change in this regard include:

- teaching our library users about these power structures as part of our standard education about evaluation of information;
- teaching the researchers we work with about these power structures and how they can push back on them by thinking more critically about where they publish in the first place, including educating them about the different open access models and the use of repositories for pre-print manuscripts; and
- having these conversations with each other as library and information specialists.

Instead of focusing our information literacy instruction on how and where to search, in other words, let's start teaching our users ways they can apply critical theory to the evaluation of both content and sources. Doing this could have real benefits not just to those users, but to society as a whole. It can not only

empower individuals to begin to push back on some of the harmful structures in the information "marketplace," but also increase their awareness of their own biases when presented with information that contradicts views they already have. It is the kind of education that can impact someone in ways that go well beyond the walls of the library.

Critical information literacy is just one component of critical librarianship, but it's one that can have a truly lasting effect on our communities. As librarians and information specialists, we have a responsibility – and a mission! – to regularly reevaluate our role in our communities, so as to ensure we are truly providing our users with the support and tools they need. It's time for us to shake off those old, outdated librarian stereotypes and "get critical"!

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