

Sloniowski, Lisa. "Who Speaks for Libraries and Librarians." Panel presentation at "Contested Terrain: Shaping the Future of Academic Librarianship." Canadian Association of University Teachers: Librarians Conference. Ottawa. October 2012.

Thanks Erin, and CAUT, for the invitation to speak today.

We've been asked to consider the topic of who speaks for librarians, and to focus on leadership in our professional associations in particular. Now, it feels a bit funny to be up here doing this for this crowd – pretty sure all of you have a good sense of what the problems are! The weak copyright statements, the lack of support for librarians attacked by their administrations or library boards, the appalling response to the Library and Archives Canada crisis... and I could go on. Our hope is to try and sketch out this known problem for you in a slightly new way, framing the problem both politically and historically and then open things up for discussion.

Jennifer Dekker is going to sketch out some more of the CLA's history and present actions for you later in this session but I'd like to take a step back and examine the kind of ideologies at work in these associations, as a way of understanding how they could have become so divorced from the concerns and needs of their members, and from the public good. In so doing, I hope to make it clear we are not attacking any particular leader or member of any association, but rather we see the behaviours of association executives and staff in a larger context – specifically in the context of neoliberal incursions into the public sector, including academia.

So, ideologies first. I want to start with 3 examples that I think are illustrative of what is going on in the leadership of our profession:

1)The CLA president, at the 2011 Toronto symposium on the crisis in academic libraries said
“the CLA is a library association not a librarians association.”

2)When asked to issue a statement condemning the wrongful confinement and arrests of citizens protesting the G20, the OLA chose not to – indicating to me that they were uncertain that this sort of statement or political work was what its members would want.

3) At the Northern Exposure to Leadership Institute, a management institute for Canadian librarians, when I went in 2006, when asked about the role of the library in relation to the public good, the mentor/speaker on stage at the time said we needed to start talking about public value rather than the public good. This sort of thinking permeated the institute.

All of these preceding statements are reflective of neoliberal ideology. Bear with me if I’m being pedantic, but I just want to make sure we are all on the same page and give a little definition of this word. David Harvey (2005) offers a useful summary of the essential characteristics of neoliberalism as an economic doctrine:

Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices. (A Brief History of Neoliberalism, p. 2)

Further, he suggests that in a neoliberal post- Fordist world, labor has become dispensable, disposable, and replaceable.

So when the president of the CLA says our national library association does not represent librarians, even though historically much of its revenue in fact comes the membership fees of librarians... we see the connection to neoliberal thought – the institution, the capital L library, is more important than its workers and somehow flourishes independently of our labour, at least in the mind of our leadership.

When an association is hesitant to take a political stance, such as the OLA on the G20, I would argue again that this is a consequence of neoliberal thinking ... our associations operate primarily now as career advancement and professional networking sites, for mentoring and climbing ever upward to the managerial class of librarianship. It prioritizes individual entrepreneurial freedom and skills within institutional frameworks... not values, citizenship or the public good.

Ok, moving on to the third statement, from NELI regarding public value, I think the neoliberal implications of a generation of library leaders being encouraged to think about public value rather than the public good is too obvious to belabour, so I won't –but I will extend this point to say that much of what was taught at the institute was about self-recognition and individualism rather than community-building. I bring up NELI because the people who lead it and mentor the junior librarians who attend, generally also have or have had a strong relationship with the CLA as well. Which is not to say they aren't frustrated with the CLA too, but perhaps for other reasons than I am. These are folks who make a strong contribution to librarianship, and I do not wish to dismiss their hard work – but I do wish to identify the ideologies underlying the choices they make.

To get pedantic again, borrowing from the work of Agamben (1998), Henri Giroux (2010) argues that universities have adopted a form of “bare pedagogy” that “strips education of its public values, critical contents and civic responsibilities as part of its broader goal of creating new subjects wedded to the logic of privatization, efficiency, flexibility, the accumulation of capital, and the destruction of the social state” (p. 185). I think the new emphasis in academic libraries on public value is a direct articulation of this new subject. And I think it divorces us from what we are good at and why we matter. When we try to articulate our value in the cold metrics of neoliberal logic we will always fail. To quote Leonard Cohen – everybody knows that the dice are loaded.

Of course we might also want to talk about the biggest thing... the commodification of knowledge and the increasing corporate influence of library vendors upon our associations. There will be others in this room who can offer more research and evidence surrounding the latter than I can – but one would have to be living under a rock to not feel the corporate presence and influence at our conferences and events. At NELI we were encouraged to not be unfriendly to vendors, and to recognize them as a vital part of the library “ecosystem.” They exist, live with it. Build relationships! While I know lots of very smart and well-meaning librarians working inside corporations, I’d argue there’s nothing natural about the commodification of information nor in the ways such commodifications and corporations serve to lock down information behind proprietary paywalls. Such rhetoric seeks to obfuscate what’s really going on, politically speaking, and obscures the choices being made.

We see the neoliberal agenda every day at work on our campuses, it should be no surprise to see it in our other institutions. In a recent Briar Patch article called The Combustible Campus, Enda Brophy notes that,

For three decades now, the neoliberal restructuring of post-secondary education has sought to implant market logic and corporate-style management into the academy. ...The resulting transformation of public university systems has brought us corporatized administrations, rising tuition, departmental closures, expanded class sizes, noxious corporate food, offensives against academic workers, and ethically dubious corporate donations.

And yet she also notes that something stirs... the student uprisings....

"From London to Montreal, from Santiago to Auckland, from Wisconsin to Mexico City, struggles against the commodification of knowledge are proliferating ... it is, by extension, a special time to be in the university. After decades of relative calm, we are witnessing the forceful emergence of autonomous and collective forms of knowledge and power produced from below, aimed squarely against those bent on transforming our learning environments from above."

I find her comment very interesting and kind of hopeful. We've certainly begun to see more people, especially students, occupy the streets in the last few years, most recently in Quebec. Whether you agree with these particular actions or not, to me there is a great relief that people appear to be shaking off some of the apathy and trying to find new ways of working together and organizing. I wonder to myself, how can we be a part of that struggle, how can we help and how can they help us? How can we build new networks of people based not on occupational roles but on political and social values, while still arguing for the unique importance of library workers in the struggle?

This was the theme of [a talk](#) I gave in February of last year at the OLA, around building solidarity in academic librarianship. I said that when we do advocacy for librarians we need to

talk about our work in terms that resonate with other members of the public sector ... who also struggle with the precariousness of labour and wage freezes. We need to explain why over-reliance upon casual precarious labour actually negatively impacts library users and our local communities. We also need to talk about our work in relation to our core values, which Naomi Klein once [said to us](#), was the stewardship of knowledge, sharing and common space. Values most under threat in a neoliberal era. Librarianship is a revolutionary choice.

We need to recentralize values and principles and ethics as the core of our professional identity and push back against the neoliberal market logic that permeates our institutions and associations. We have a civic responsibility. Our social responsibility is what should define us. There may be others who share our concerns, but we are the only ones funded by the public to preserve and protect these values. And if our associations will not do this for us – we must leave them. IN DROVES.

And in defining 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. That advocating for librarians is also advocating for libraries. Because libraries and all they represent are built on the backs of our labour and the labour of our library technician colleagues. Libraries are the product of labour, 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 we do.

Hopeful signs for me include the righteousness of the BCLA and the Newfoundland Library

Associations who have issued great statements on the G20 and the Access Copyright fight. There are moments like

- the recent OLITA symposium on liberation technology where I got excited about the growing potential in the OLA.
- the recent issue of a social justice themed *Access Magazine* edited by Mike Ridley.
- the recent establishment of local nodes of THE PLG in Edmonton, London and Toronto,
- and of course, CAUT's awesome Save LAC campaign and this symposium today itself.

We should look to these initiatives and groups and see what we can learn from them. Because in the end there are no heroes, and no straight answers – we must think locally, build community and solidarity, and figure out how to get beyond our myopic associations and work across communities of shared interest. Librarians should not only be talking to one another.

To completely take out of context some words from recently deceased cultural geographer Neil Smith, from his article “The Revolutionary Imperative” - one of the greatest dangers of our time lies in acquiescing to the limits of the present, to not lose the imaginative capacity that enables us to see beyond the ideological constraints imposed by the current era ([as cited by Thomas Ponniah in Rabble](#)). Luckily, librarians have a unique capacity to organize and to take the long view. It's time to harness our professional strengths to our necessary activist work.

Thanks!

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Selected References

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