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Kritiska informations-kompetenser, progressivt biblioteksarbete och en lockout

Hur politisk kan man vara i sitt professionella utövande, på vilket sätt kan kritiskt åskådarskap bidra till kritisk informationskompetens och hur bemöter man en lockout från sin arbetsgivare? Det är några av frågorna som avhandlas i en konversation mellan Martin Persson och den amerikanske bibliotekarien och forskaren Eamon Tewell.

Text: Martin Persson och Eamon Tewell

Hi Eamon! We're very happy that you want to join us for a conversation in *bis*. Let me start with three questions about professional identity: What kind of librarian are you, why did you choose to become a librarian, and what does the profession mean to you?

Thank you for the invitation. It's an honor to be speaking with Sweden's premier progressive library journal! I'm an academic librarian at a university in Brooklyn, New York. My title is "Reference & Instruction Librarian" which speaks to the primary responsibilities in my job: lots of answering reference questions from students and faculty, and lots of teaching classes for students on how to use the library and think critically about information. A typical day includes an hour or two at the reference desk, preparing for and teaching a library instruction session, a meeting or two about library or university projects and initiatives, and keeping up with emails.

I became a librarian because I appreciate the socially conscious roles libraries and library workers can take on, and the progressive potential that libraries represent as institutions aligned with the ideals of access, intellectual freedom, and cooperation. I grew up in a family of social justice types – for example, my parents named me after Ammon Hennacy, an Irish-American pacifist, worker's rights activist, and Christian anarchist who was active from the 1930s to the 1960s – so combining the values instilled in me with my interests in supporting people's educational goals and their access to information naturally led me to the library. Libraries have a long history of politically progressive work of course, which in the U.S. has ranged from Miriam Braverman's career of activism to newly-appointed Librarian of Congress Carla Hayden's work to the efforts of groups like the Progressive Librarians Guild and Radical Reference (not to mention all of the extremely inspiring librarians I am lucky to call my colleagues). It was this tradition that I wanted to contribute to in some small way.

Librarianship means being aware of one's role in their community and in the information world, and finding ways to work with library users to resist the commercialization of life. To some degree, the very existence of libraries is counter to prevailing values of accumulating capital above all else and every person for their self. Libraries encourage alternate systems of information distribution and inspire collectivity. At the same time, this awareness means recognizing the many roles libraries have played and continue to play in furthering the interests of the dominant culture and maintaining the status quo. After all, libraries and higher education reflect and perpetuate the larger culture they are part of. These dominant values are reflected in our collections (only making available and thus endorsing the interests and viewpoints of white men), the services we provide (which tend to ignore marginalized people), the demographics of the profession (largely white and female-majority, but with a disproportionate number of men in management positions) and are even visible in the classification systems our libraries are organized upon. So for me, the profession means to both recognize these ways that libraries participate unconsciously in systems of oppression and find ways to engage learners with critically evaluating information, social issues, and their place in the world, while encouraging library workers and library users alike to take action.

We met at an LIS conference in June where you presented a paper on *critical information literacies* and *resistant spectatorship*, two concepts that can be productive in thinking about, and contesting, information flows regulated by corporate entities and the commercialization of "the public sphere" (or whatever we should call it). Could you briefly introduce these concepts, and how you think they can be useful in professional practice and Library and Information Studies (LIS) research? What are the societal injustices that these concepts address? How do we engage to improve our critical information literacies, and how do we become resistant spectators?

Resistant spectatorship is an idea first proposed by theorist and activist Stuart Hall in the 1970s. This theory claims that when people engage with a media object, such as a book, website, video, or other text that is produced and distributed through corporate channels (which today is a great deal of the information we encounter), the person engaging with this media will not necessarily accept the message they receive, and may have the ability to contest, revise, reassemble, or otherwise resist it in a way counter to the dominant ideology's interests. So resistant spectatorship reminds us that people may in fact have significant agency when they interact with media and information, and this agency is largely based upon their own experiences, cultural background, and personal motivations. In library practice and research I feel there is a tendency to lump "library users" or "students" into large homogeneous groups, which doesn't account for the richness and complexity of people's experiences and what they already bring to the library or information practices.

The paper I presented applies the concept of resistant spectatorship to our highly commodified information world that is increasingly governed by international corporations such as Google, and proposes critical information literacy as a theory and practice for librarians and LIS researchers to intervene upon these systems of domination. Critical information literacy is a collection of ideas and practices that has been gaining attention over the last dozen years, and takes issue with the largely apolitical and decontextualized understandings of information literacy in the profession (for more on this, see the literature review I wrote titled "A Decade of Critical Information Literacy"[1]). At its core, critical information literacy is a way of thinking about and doing library work that takes into account the social, political, and economic forces of libraries and information. It often applies critical theories or critical pedagogy to libraries, but any critical examination of libraries' educational

1. http://www.comminfolit.org/index.php?journal=cil&page=article&op=view&path%5B%5D=v9i1p24.

efforts may fit under this umbrella. This can translate into rethinking any number of librarian roles and responsibilities, but much of the critical librarianship conversation in the U.S. has focused on teaching in libraries. I recently completed a research project that provides some examples of critical information literacy in practice, which was published in *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*.[2] I see critical information literacy as a groundwork for putting the ideals of libraries into action, and an invitation to engage in the inherently political work that is being a librarian.

Eamon Tewell.

Critical information literacy and resistant spectatorship both ask us to consider the everyday, oftentimes uncomplicated interactions we all have with information and technology, and to reconsider these relationships. For example, Google is a giant corporation that serves as a primary information provider across the Western world. Searching Google and receiving relevant information feels so effortless that we are likely to forget a number of important facts: that Google's goal is not necessarily to provide information, but to sell advertisements (which accounts for 90 percent of their revenue) and make money for their shareholders; that Google is an effective search engine because it tracks extremely detailed personal information about its users as they conduct their online activities; and that Google's corporate values are embedded in the very results it presents to us because of its algorithms and other secretive products are designed by their engineers to maximize profit. Google is just one example among many, and the commodification of information is everywhere. Within libraries, we would do well to consider how paywalls to scholarly journals shape what important information people do and do not have access to, which is dependent upon libraries having the money to subscribe to outrageously expensive journal packages and vendor products. When we reach paywalls online, or just as importantly, glide past these paywalls by entering our university credentials, we should consider what it means to do so, and those social and economic forces at work behind the scenes.

The "inherently political" character of library work is something that our field shares with many – if not all – professions and activities in society (including research!), even though the politics are not always articulated, acknowledged or agreed upon. But even if the roles of activism and professional librarianship can be seen as inevitably intertwined, the "progressive potential that libraries represent" is not always fully realized the way we want to, due to disagreement, organizational structures, or other limits and obstacles. How do you think about potential clashes between these two poles, and the risks of being perceived as "*too* critical" in a professional setting? I guess partnering up with colleagues and arguing through a strong user-solidarity perspective are key, or what do you say?

That's an important point you make about the many obstacles in the way of libraries embracing their roles as expressly political actors. Even if one's library affirms social justice goals, what those goals mean in practice would vary widely, and simply claiming libraries to be judgment-free bastions for exploration and critical thinking doesn't make that so. The risks of being perceived as "too critical" are very real – I've spoken to librarians with colleagues who think they're taking their work too seriously, or putting more thought into it than is needed, or even causing unnecessary trouble and bringing unwanted attention to the library in a climate of austerity. It's also true that being able to express one's possibly unpopular opinions at work requires some degree of privilege, since in some places speaking critically about one's workplace can get them fired.

At the same time this is an important and necessary dialogue to have, and there are small ways to broach these topics with colleagues and work toward a mutual understanding of personal and institutional aims. This could be done in departmental meetings, one-on-one, or by involving people outside of the library. The exact form it could take would depend on many factors, but I picture it requiring a lot of conversation, willingness to be open, and time. Librarians Megan Watson and Dave Ellenwood wrote a chapter in the recently published *Critical Library Pedagogy Handbook*[3] that offers strategies for beginning conversations like these, and I highly recommend it (as well as the rest of the book).

In academic libraries in the U.S., there are tenure-track librarian positions, which means that you, in addition to

2. http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2016/putting-critical-information-literacy-into-context-how-and-why-librarians-adopt-critical-practices-in-their-teaching/.

3. See http://www.alastore.ala.org/detail.aspx?ID=11883.

practical library work, also conduct research within the field. As a tenure-track librarian, what would you say are the benefits of being part of faculty and being active as a researcher? How does your practical librarian work feed back into your research and vice-versa?

I'm really thankful for having a tenure-track librarian position. I didn't realize that these positions are primarily only in North America until after I started attending international conferences, where I learned just how uncommon library jobs that combine research and workplace responsibilities are in other places. No one is entirely sure how many librarians in the U.S. have faculty status or the option for tenure, but most estimates are that half of colleges and universities have librarians with faculty status and half do not. This number is likely decreasing as the erosion of tenure and the adjunctification of universities continues, which is a whole other very alarming issue.

There are a lot of benefits to being faculty and having an active research agenda. First and foremost are the material benefits – as part of the faculty union, the librarians benefit from higher pay and better health insurance plans than if we were not unionized. And while this is not necessarily the case for all tenure-track librarians, we are supported by having time off from work to pursue research and some funding to attend and present at conferences. So I'm very privileged to not just have faculty status in name, but also in practice. Having faculty status, the librarians at my institution tend to be seen more as colleagues and equals by the teaching faculty in other departments, whereas in staff positions I've held this was far from the case. This can help in daily library work, such as developing collections, planning events, and creating better academic support for students, but also with larger efforts like strengthening solidarity.

The advantage of pursuing research along with my practical librarian work means that praxis is never far away. My everyday work necessarily informs my research and the theory that comes with it, which I also reflect upon in order to improve my work. For example, the teaching I do often informs my research ideas, and vice-versa. It is this exchange between practice, reflection, and action that I am most appreciative of, knowing how difficult that balance can be to achieve even temporarily.

As I understand it, not all institutions offer tenure-track library positions, and if they do, it's a limited set of positions, right? How does this affect individual and collective librarian identities in the workplace do you think, does it cause a split between colleagues who are on tenure-track and those who aren't?

You're correct that only some institutions offer tenure-track library positions, and of those, only "professional" positions requiring a masters degree in Library Science have the possibility of tenure. This has the potential to create a split between library workers, but doesn't necessarily, or not more so than an institution without faculty status for librarians. There will always be divides of some sort between workers due to status (whether it's differences in pay or hours, or less tangible but important things like receiving respect and autonomy), but tensions at my university are nothing I haven't experienced in other settings. More than anything, I think having faculty status underscores the importance of faculty, possessing the privilege and relative stability of tenure, to establish solidarity with other campus workers and put themselves on the line when adjuncts, staff, and any other workers in precarious situations are targeted.

Foto: Pete Birkinshaw (https://www.flickr.com/photos/binaryape/), CC BY.

Are there downsides to having a tenure-track position? What about entering the academic competition race, and having to "publish or perish" in an academia governed by neoliberal ideals and new public management? Does your position mean that you will eventually earn a Ph.D.?

Tenure-track life can be very stressful. There is so much to balance at once, and the expectations for what should be accomplished are often changing or unclear. Thankfully, along with the pressures of publishing and presenting, there is a lot of encouragement from my colleagues (I don't know what I would do without Emily Drabinski, Kate Angell, and the other librarians I work with). We are all very supportive of one

Protester mot lockouten vid Long Island University. Foto: Eamon Tewell.

another, which helps greatly. A Ph.D. is not required for librarians, but is an option if one wants to earn it. Receiving tenure requires a second master's degree in addition to the master's in Library Science. This area of subject specialty can be whatever you'd like. Last year I completed a master's in Film Studies at my university, which has been very useful for me both as a person interested in visual culture and for generating new research ideas and connections.

When investing so much time and effort into a tenure-track position or a job in academe of any kind, the questions of "What am I really contributing to here?" and "Will I want to stay in a work environment increasingly enamored with corporate ideals?" that you mention definitely arise. Similar to choosing to work in librarianship in a time of intensifying commodification, I hope that I can act to slow the corporatization of the university in small but potentially meaningful ways. Everything that we do contributes to the shaping of our workplaces and leaves a little mark, whether it's the way we teach a class, the publications we add to a collection, the terms we assign to items while cataloging, or the displays and events we organize. Knowing this helps me see past the day-to-day challenges. Tenure in particular provides important protections for individuals and encourages the shared governance of one's workplace, so this would help even more in maintaining the hard-won advances that librarians and faculty have made over previous decades in terms of working conditions and compensation.

Recently, as employees of Long Island University, you were subject to a lockout by your employer – a historical aggression (a lockout against faculty has never previously occured in American history) where you were cut off from work (including salary, health insurance, work email, and campus access) for a couple of weeks. What happened, and how did you mobilixe resistance to end the lockout? What happened to the negotiations between your union and the LIU administration afterwards?

The lockout that took place at my university was a really eye-opening experience. Every few years the university administration and the faculty union at Long Island University's Brooklyn campus negotiate a new contract for adjuncts and full-time faculty to work under. This tends to be a very contentious process, particularly considering we are one of the few private universities in the U.S. where faculty are unionized. Our contract was set to expire at the beginning of September and it appeared no agreement would be reached. Before faculty could even vote on the proposed contract, university administration locked us out with only a day's notice – our healthcare, income, access to offices, and email were all cut very suddenly, and with major ramifications for the health and well-being of the 400-some faculty and their families.

As you mention, this was the first time such a hostile and aggressive action took place in U.S. higher education. To keep the university running while faculty were locked out, administration quickly hired replacement workers who were highly unqualified to teach or asked non-unionized staff members to teach classes they had little or no expertise in. Oftentimes replacement workers would not show up to the class they were scheduled to teach, leaving students paying full tuition with no instructors. Students began to organize walkouts, protesting the shocking and extremely unfair situation they

were put in, and showing solidarity with faculty on the picket line. Thanks to a number of factors – support from students, our parent union, an increasing number of very high profile news articles, and the extremely hard work of union leadership – administration agreed to end the lockout and extend the current contract until May 2017, with a mediator to be brought in to assist in the negotiation process. The fight continues, but I'm hopeful that a new contract will be agreed upon before it expires again.

My fear is that the lockout is indicative of larger trends in higher education, and that faculty in a range of settings will be subject to unprecedented attacks such as this. Beyond the assault on faculty and unions, one of the most disturbing things to me is that librarians and adjuncts, two of the most vulnerable groups within the faculty, are targeted and singled out in the proposed contract. The contract would require librarians to work 15 additional days per year for the same amount of pay, and to accept a reduction in overtime pay. Adjuncts also face major setbacks that include a massive pay reduction per class taught. To ask someone to work more and receive less is deplorable, and thankfully the other faculty stand by us in agreement that these terms are unacceptable. Maybe by the time this conversation is published a new contract that affirms shared governance and fair wages and benefits for all faculty will have been agreed upon – one can hope!

We sure hope so, these proposed changes sound really bad! A final question: What are you working on right now? I saw that you are co-editing an anthology titled *Reference Librarianship & Justice: History, Practice & Praxis* to be published by Library Juice Press – that seems like an interesting read!

Yes, one project I am currently working on is a edited collection of chapters relating to reference librarianship and social justice. I'm very excited by this, since I and the other editors, Kate Adler and Ian Beilin, feel that reference librarianship tends to be left out of larger conversations on critical librarianship but holds a great deal of potential in promoting social justice. Moreover, there is a long tradition of progressive reference practice both in the U.S. and internationally that is largely unaddressed. The three sections of the book will speak to the history of progressive reference librarianship in different places and time periods, to various theories or ideas that can inform politically progressive reference work, and to some socially conscious initiatives and efforts reference librarians are currently involved in. The contributors to the book have proposed some very interesting and useful ideas, so I'm really looking forward to sharing their work. More information about the book can be found at the Library Juice Press website,[4] and we expect it will be published in fall 2017.

Beyond the *Reference Librarianship & Justice* book, I am beginning a research project questioning the application of "resilience" to libraries and library workers. "Resilience" is a very popular buzzword in the U.S. that started out in the environmental disaster and psychological fields, but is now being used in many other areas that include education. I think the idea of resilience (and the other buzzword often associated with it, "grit") can be harmful when applied to libraries and education because it shifts the responsibility for institutional decisions to individuals, and makes it the individual's shortcoming if they are not able to cope or prove that they are resilient in difficult work environments or achieving success in school. This makes existing problems worse, because asking a person to be "resilient" deflects attention from the structural problems at hand. I will be attending the Critical Librarianship Workshop[5] in December to work through some of these ideas with other critically-minded librarians. I'm just starting out on this project, but am excited to see where it takes me.

That sounds like two important as well as inspiring projects. We are looking forward to reading the upcoming book. Again, thank you for joining us from across the Atlantic, it's been great to hear your thoughts on a variety of library work topics!

Thank you, I've really enjoyed this conversation. I am likewise inspired by the efforts of *bis* and other progressive and radical library groups. Knowing that this type of work is international is really energizing and gives me lots of hope.

4. http://libraryjuicepress.com/reference-justice.php.
5. http://criticallibrarianshipworkshop.weebly.com/.