CRITICAL VOICES IN LIBRARY AND INFORMATION WORK

Voices and Inspiration from the Discipline

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23 Eamon Tewell

While earning his bachelor's in English from the University of Denver with the hopes of pursuing a career as an author, Eamon Tewell found himself working part-time at the university library circulation desk. It was there that he realized that while "writing books is great, working in a library would be a viable career choice that came with a steady paycheck as well as the satisfaction of connecting people to information and helping them to interpret it." After receiving a master's degree in library and information science from Drexel University's College of Computing and Informatics, Tewell worked his first professional academic librarian jobs in reference and instruction at Sarah Lawrence College and Long Island University before moving into his current position as Head of Research Support and Outreach at Columbia University Libraries. Tewell approaches both library practice and research from a perspective rooted in the critical/cultural study of communication and media.

Tewell credits his drive to identify and challenge oppressive power structures to his upbringing. His mother, an advocate for people with disabilities, encouraged him to question authority and to view existing societal relations with a healthy amount of skepticism. He would later apply the general principles he learned from observing his mother's work to his own work in academic libraries:

> First, I am interested in advancing critical perspectives in libraries. I try and do that through my day-to-day work. It can be through simple things, like one-on-one meetings, looking for opportunities to think about what we are doing as library workers, looking for the assumptions we make as library workers. A lot of my coworkers are responsive to that, identifying oppressive functions of the library and university, situating ourselves within that, finding ways to pay attention to it, and working against it. This is something that I do day-to-day, but also through publishing and presenting. Second, I do whatever I can to support librarians, new librarians, and prospective librarians in the profession.

While Tewell sees academic libraries as sites of learning, he recognizes that they are also sites of oppression. He seeks to understand how libraries, and by

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extension, library workers, act as barriers through their institutional weight and gatekeeping functions, and he does this with the goal of providing workable interventions. Deeply invested in educating users to navigate the library and world of information, Tewell sees library instruction, whether it be in a classroom setting or individually through the reference interview, as a means for fostering critical perspectives in library patrons.

Prominent British Cultural Studies scholar and former director of the acclaimed University of Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), Stuart Hall (1932–2014), is a major influence on Tewell's approach to librarianship. Hall is known for his development of the encoding/decoding model of communication, which he explicated in a series of influential papers published in the 1970s. Tewell first read Hall's (1973) conference paper, "Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse," as a course reading while completing a second master's degree in media arts at Long Island University. The main concept of "Encoding and Decoding" is a simple one, i.e., that mass media messages of all sorts (although Hall focuses on television broadcasts in this paper) all communicate something, whether it is subtext or not. These highly produced messages are sent out to a mass audience and are then decoded by individual audience members. During this decoding, however, something interesting happens. According to Hall's analysis, the messages are not simply received and accepted as held by previous theories of communication transmission like Harold Lasswell's (1927) "hypodermic theory" of communication transmission, in which audience members passively accept the contents of media messages that are broadcast to them, or the Shannon-Weaver (1963) model of communication, in which a message is encoded, transmitted through a channel where it might be altered through encountering "noise," and then decoded. Taking the Shannon-Weaver model, Hall recognized audience member agency in the decoding process. He proposed three possible ways an audience member might react to a particular message: (1) accepting the hegemonic position as presented, (2) rejecting the message, or (3) assuming a negotiated position in relation to it that "accords the privileged [hegemonic] position to the dominant definition of events, whilst reserving the right to make a more negotiated application to 'local conditions'" (Hall, 1973, p. 17). Although Hall used broad strokes when developing these three possible outcomes, other communication and information researchers would explore the model in more detail. For example, Dick Hebdige's (1979) classic book on punk rock subculture, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, used Hall's encoding/decoding as a touchstone. Tewell recognized the possible applications of Hall's theory to his work in the academic library:

> Hall's encoding/decoding model is a model for thinking about learning in libraries, people's relationship to search engines, and other advertising platforms… that is, new forms of mass media that extend way beyond TV but still have this essential takeaway, which is that people may go with the dominant hegemonic narrative. They may say, 'sure, that sounds right

> to me.' They may take a negotiated position, which is some elements of the message they agree with, and some they do not—kind of a mixed bag. Or they may take a resistant and oppositional approach to it. They are hearing, learning, encountering. So yeah, I apply this approach to libraries, information literacy, and how we engage students in these resistant and oppositional ways of understanding information whether it is the library, whether it is a search engine, whatever it is. So, cultivating a third type oppositional reading.

For Tewell, this might mean taking a text that his library instruction class is working with, or possibly a particular database, and interrogating what is going on behind the scenes with it. For example, investigating questions with the class like, where did the library get a certain database? What other business ventures might the database's publishers be involved with, which, by default, the academic library supports as well? The reference desk also serves as a site for teaching and providing students with oppositional readings of concepts that they—as well as many educators—might not have thought much about or had taken for granted. Tewell offered the traditional scholarly peer-review process as one example:

> One area that has been productive for critical pedagogy is peer review. Students are always asked to find five, seven, possibly ten peer-reviewed articles for the research paper. That continues to be the default. Because of that, it has been a great way to problematize the scholarly process and explain what happens when an article is published, i.e., what goes into that. Like it is typically someone who is doing research as part of their job, maybe in a graduate assistant position. Whatever it is, they are doing it for free for the journal in a concrete sense. So, this might mean the reference librarian explaining what peer review means to some amount and then just having that sort of conversation with students because they are scandalized when they hear about it, 'Really? They do that for free, and the journal publishes it, and the libraries pay for it? That makes no sense.'

Tewell thinks that Hall's encoding/decoding model still holds up today, more than 50 years since he introduced it. This fortitude is likely because the model leaves room for communication researchers to consider how things might play out in different communities and contexts, allowing them to expand beyond Hall's three decoding categories and develop a spectrum of ideological decisions. While Hall dealt with polished media messages and television broadcasts, today's social media platforms and networks of communication that allow push-pull communication exchange open interesting avenues for reconsideration of Hall's work.

Tewell said that critical/cultural communication theories like those of Hall and other CCCS luminaries like Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart do

not often show up much in the library and information science (LIS) research literature. Nevertheless, he said that there are many sources for inspiration outside of the library literature that apply well to the work being done by critical library workers today, including queer theory, anti-racism, and critical race theory. Critical pedagogy has been one that really provided a different direction and knowledge base for teaching in libraries. Tewell suggested the work of author Django Paris as an important source of thinking on the topic of culturally responsive pedagogy. Through books like *Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies: Teaching and Learning for Justice in a Changing World* (Paris, 2017), Paris draws on existing sources of knowledge for students, avoiding as much as possible imposing value judgments about what type of information is useful and what is not. Through his work, Tewell said, Paris really gets to the source of issues faced by libraries, such as why there are hetero-male-oriented collections in every library across North America, and considers why, if you are not actively working on them or at least surfacing these issues, then you are perpetuating the status quo.

The critically conscious and communication-centered approach Tewell has taken in the classroom has led him to extend his research to issues of librarian labor within the library classroom and the library as a whole:

> When you are working with students as a librarian in a classroom setting, there is only so much you can do in that period of time. That got me thinking about time as an issue. Are the faculty and instructors interested in giving up their own class time for our librarians as guest lecturer? It made me realize that, instead of being a time issue, it is more of a broader labor issue in general. So, my time spent at my job doing instruction or otherwise, is my labor. […] I began thinking about it in that context and asking questions like: Okay, if this is the time that I am spending in the classroom, how do I really want to prioritize? How do I choose to spend it? Does that mean teaching dozens of one-hour sessions every semester? And that just leads to burnout. Does that mean saying no to requests if that is even possible?

Tewell's current research explores the implications of the usage of buzzwords and popular concepts in the context of library labor. The word "Resilience" is an example of one such buzzword that has seen increasing use in the academic library. Resilience is used to describe the ability to bounce back from an obstacle or adverse effect that comes in an employee's way, denoting the ability to respond to a challenge, rise above it, and overcome it. Tewell pointed to the COVID-19 pandemic as a catalyst for an uptick in the word's usage in the workplace and the underlying structural issues that are revealed by such buzzwords' usage for human resource management:

> The problem is not the specific buzzword. It is not like if you swap out this buzzword out for another one that everything will be OK.

> The buzzword points to these foundational issues of transferring blame and responsibility onto the individual library worker. So, it becomes not the fact that the university made these decisions or that the government made this decision that is the problem, it becomes the way that an individual chooses to respond to the decisions that is really the problem: 'If you just found a way to *be Resilient*, then great, you are on the right track.'

Words like Resilience, Tewell said, draw attention away from systemic issues in the academic library and higher education, such as changes that should be happening within the institutions at a deeper level. So instead of facing such fundamental issues, employees might instead "get weekly emails from human resources to do things like 'join our Mindfulness session and learn how to boost your personal resilience.'" Resilience becomes a means to shift blame elsewhere, i.e., from the systemic issue to the individual who is not being sufficiently Resilient. Tewell pointed to another buzzword used in education: "Grit," a term he investigated thoroughly in a recent article for the journal *portal: Libraries and the Academy* (Tewell, 2020). The library employee is expected to develop their Grittiness and, if they work harder, they will persevere and be successful at their labor: "It is just kind of this cottage industry that aligns well with the use of buzzwords like Resilience and Mindfulness and everything else."

Considering issues like this, insidious institutional coercion, Tewell said that it is important for critical library workers to remain vigilant and to push back as much as they are able to in the positions that they find themselves in, for incorporating change in the most radical way that they can:

> Honestly, I think it leads a lot of the time organizing with colleagues, labor organizing, or just identifying concerns that we need to have addressed as workers. So, it comes down to labor issues. If it is critical librarianship without teeth, then what is the point. But what the teeth look like is very dependent on lens, context, and institution. You know, if you are precariously employed, whatever it is, what you can do really differs.

Tewell noted critical librarianship's increasing popularity among today's library workers. But, although popularity might be a good problem to have, it runs the risks of becoming window dressing, clever yet superficial, and a buzzword:

> Institutions will be like 'Nice! You go have fun in your little class and teach them all about critical perspectives and knock yourself out.' A lot of that has happened. We will continue to have diversity and racism initiatives—which for many US states at this point are not even able to happen under that same language. Just kind of that whole 'encapture,' for lack of a better word, of the critical approach. Institutions will love to just say 'Oh, look at this innovative stuff that we are doing! Good for us!

> Keep doing it! We are going to support you in any meaningful way, but we are going to make it so it does not question any of our actual structures or foundations and reflect and change what we are doing. But as long as it does not really change anything, go for it!'

The point then—and this is what Tewell strives to accomplish as an academic librarian—is to get library workers to recognize that they do indeed have teeth. Furthermore, they must put those teeth to good use, transforming not only the realities of their patrons but their own realities as well.

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