Editor's Column: Crisis

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Introduction

"Indignation and outrage and protesting seem the order of the day these days – from the verdicts in the Steubenville rape case to the current considerations regarding same-sex marriage to something rather more professionally closer to home: ALA President Maureen Sullivan's stance on faculty status for librarians."

That's how my original editor's column was going to start. That column was going to look at the history of faculty status for librarians – a topic I did a lot of research on back in 2003, in preparation for a presentation at ACRL-LA, on faculty-librarian collaboration – and why it's important for academic librarians to continue to fight for faculty status. I was going to relate how my audacity in the Faculty Senate to speak my mind before I was tenured shocked and appalled old-school tenured faculty. I was going to rant about how much prestige libraries – and therefore, by extension, librarians – bring to universities. I was going to rant about how essential librarians are to the processes of information and knowledge creation.

I wish I could rouse myself enough to write that column. I still believe in all of those things. I still cognitively realize their importance, their significance, not only to my own career as a librarian – being a tenured librarian at the rank of associate professor I definitely have a dog in this fight – but also to all my colleagues who endure the stressful tenure/promotion process in hopes of obtaining job security and professional respect.

But frankly, I just can't get Boston out of my head. It takes me back to Katrina. They both take me back to 9/11. And all three, honestly, take the wind out of my sails for

the topic of faculty status.

Instead, I'd like to talk about *helping*. Librarianship is, after all, a helping profession. Most often, we're encouraged to think in terms of *customer service*, but personally I didn't go to library school thinking, "I want to provide customer service." I went to library school thinking, "I want to help other people. I'm good at research, so I want to help other people be good at research, too. That will help them." My sister is a nurse; she didn't go to nursing school thinking, "I want to provide customer service." She went to nursing school thinking, "I want to help others. I want to help improve the quality of their lives. I can do that as a nurse." People who join helping professions join not for money or prestige but simply because they want to help others, in some way.

And librarianship is most definitely a helping profession, and, like one librarian wrote (regarding her philosophy of librarianship), "librarianship is about people."[1] But in times of crisis – like Boston or Katrina or 9/11 – it can be difficult to figure out *how* to help people, especially from a library/librarian angle. And it's not just because sometimes librarians can't figure out how their skills – which are so obvious and useful in the library environment – might apply in crisis. For some, the conflict of personal values with partisan positions or institutional policies can create a sort of rock-and-hard-place way of thinking, resulting in no action at all. Indeed, as one scholar noted, librarianship often suffers "uncertainty regarding its own role and motives in the context of political uncertainty."[2] To some librarians, the library is a neutral space; to others, "Neutrality can obfuscate injustices and the possibilities for active contributions. Often, neutrality is not a defense of the controversial, but rather an avoidance of it."[3]

However, in spite of these issues, libraries and librarians still manage to reach out

and help. Let's take a look at some examples.

Literature Review: Focus on 9/11 and Hurricanes Katrina and Rita

In trying to determine how librarians might respond in crisis situations, I looked to the literature regarding how librarians helped in the aftermath of 9/11 and following Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. In both cases, a significant portion of the literature dealt mostly with access to information. In the case of 9/11, the literature tended to focus on the Patriot Act and how librarians could engender a sense of security in patrons regarding the patrons' personal information.

However, Tara Brabazon, writing about 9/11 in 2004, noted that with regard to ending terrorist violence, "Education, librarianship, and the development of critical literacy is a [sic] necessary facilitator of the process."[4] Brabazon suggests that "The core concern…is how to create cycles of reflection, to move beyond the reproduction (and recycling) of words through cut and paste, and create a critical and analytical perspective."[5] It's not enough to point users towards information; users need to be taught to critically evaluate resources in myriad contexts, particularly social, political, and economic contexts. Users are moving through "an ideas-thick" rather than an ideas-rich[6] environment, particularly with regard to the Internet where "fast, frequently unchecked rumor" overtakes "verified and credible journalism,"[7] which in turn can often lead to misunderstanding, the perpetuation of misinformation, distorted details, and all the attendant ramifications of such things, such as violence, vigilantism, vandalism, and the targeting and estrangement of segments of the population (such as Muslims after 9/11).

Brabazon is suggesting that librarians can help preempt such situations by teaching users to search for and critically evaluate information; reflect meaningfully on

the information, especially in the aforementioned contexts; and to be especially careful with regard to Internet resources. To put it another way: the information literacy skills we teach every day in the Library are a means of helping. By teaching our users to *think* about what they're reading and from where they obtained what they're reading, we can – at best – help users come to a better understanding of the world at large and its attendant problems, and – at least – help users quash knee-jerk reactions and be thoughtful regarding information they come in contact with, especially information from the Internet.

The literature regarding librarians helping following Hurricanes Katrina and Rita focused primarily on rebuilding libraries, or how unaffected libraries helped evacuees and affected libraries. The American Librarian Association responded by creating several new pages of resources, including the Hurricane Katrina Relief Fund (with which the Canadian Library Association helped), a "linked list of associations that established disaster relief funds to aid libraries," and an Adopt a Library program.[8] The Book Relief Project, a collaboration between the Library of Congress and the non-profit First Book Organization, gathered books to give to evacuees, affected schools, and affected libraries.[9] Both the Young Adult Library Services Association and the Association for Library Services generated lists of fiction and non-fiction books to help children and teenagers cope with the tragedy.[10] Adelaide Myers Fletcher, an MLIS student at LSU at the time of Hurricane Katrina, described her experience in trying to provide resources for medical personnel working at shelters, providing resources and Internet access through collaboration.[11]

Library Services as Helping

In both of these contexts – Brabazon's article and the Katrina articles – there is a clear demonstration of how librarians and libraries can help, using librarian skills and library resources. Ya-Ling Lu, writing about readers' advisory as coping assistance, also demonstrates how useful librarian skills and library resources can be. She writes, "Coping assistance is not simply a temporary response to a national tragedy, and it should not be thus limited."[12] She provides examples of personal problems that are often mentioned in the context of readers' advisory, identifying five categories of queries: behavior (e.g., bullying or manners); emotion (e.g., grief or anger); relationships (e.g., divorce or a new sibling); achievement (e.g., computer skills); and empathy (e.g., injuries).[13]

Readers' advisory, like critical thinking and information literacy skills, can function as integrated approaches to crisis, meaning that libraries and librarian skills can be useful apart from *and* before, during, and after crisis. So, what about ongoing crises or issues of social justice/injustice?

Two articles from the early 1990s examine the issue of the academic library and social responsibility. Renee Rude and Robert Hauptman suggested that academic libraries – like public libraries – ought to serve "unserved populations: the poor, minorities, the disabled, and the disenfranchised."[14] They assert that library resources aren't useful if they aren't being used, either by the campus community and the general community. They list nine ways in which academic libraries can reach unserved populations, including outreach, physical and emotional accommodation, actively integrating resources into classroom work, and "administering [resources] so that alienation is reduced and ultimately eliminated."[15] While Rude and Hauptman take a broader approach in 1990, Judith Segal in 1991 advocates the use of library resources to fight "social ills

that cause needless suffering and death" with a focus on AIDS.[16] Segal advises the

academic library to "politicize its professional mission and became an active ally"[17] in

the battle against AIDS. Furthermore, she writes,

> The academic library has distinctive resources and ways of disseminating knowledge that will enable it to educate its constituents – including students, faculty, staff, and other library users – in the prevention of social abuses, and the development of increased sensitivity and tolerance.[18]

Segal goes on to say that knowledge "should be in the service of all, not only those who

ask," that it's not just about access but teaching as well, so that users know how to ask

meaningful questions and become thoughtful consumers of information.[19] And though

Segal focuses on AIDS, she asserts that this attitude can be used for other "social

problems," that the library can offer a "new service" that "amounts to educational

campaigning" that would

> […] inform the library's public (students, faculty, staff, and researchers alike) of the critical nature of various social problems, define those problems, point out the knowledge gaps, and connect the real and related meanings lying behind many of these problems.[20]

Segal outlines a plan, "modeled on the mass media,"[21] that libraries can implement in

pursuit of social responsibility, demonstrating where changes can be made in existing

library services and offerings, permitting an integration of social responsibility into the

library's existing mission and vision.

More on Libraries, Librarianship, and Social Responsibility

Douglas Raber, looking at the history of social responsibility in the American

Library Association, notes that the "spectre of social responsibility"[22] was haunting

librarianship in the 1960s during the height of the Civil Rights movement. Committees

were formed to examine the issue and make recommendations – namely the Activities

Committee on New Directions (ACONDA) and the Ad Hoc Activities Committee on New Directions (ANACONDA). In 1970 ACONDA released its report and recommendations regarding social responsibility; resistance and concern began to emerge, namely in the form of political stances. One librarian respondent to the report was "in favor of social responsibility that involves helping people improve themselves, but opposed…interpreting that" as "political responsibility."[23] This highlights that common concern regarding what responsibilities libraries and librarians have in the context of social issues: neutrality.

Raber, channeling Arthur Curley, states that "the context and meaning of social responsibility would likely depend on whether one was speaking of libraries, librarians, or librarianship."[24] The efforts of the committees, Raber suggests, represents "a negotiation" in order to "clarify the terms of librarianship's social contract with its patrons, regardless of their status as library users" and "the good the profession ought to do…"[25]

Melissa Morrone and Lia Friedman, writing about Radical Reference (RR), state that librarians "must make contact with their targeted base and serve them in the manner best suited to the situation" and identifies the RR base as "progressive activists and independent journalists."[26] In their discussion of socially responsible librarianship, they note that "information about the social justice activities of library workers centers on intra-institutional action" though they acknowledge the work of ACONDA and ANACONDA, which they feel represents "outreach to previously-disregarded constituencies."[27] They include another element of social justice in the context of libraries: "the inclusion and support of the alternative press."[28]

They highlight the efforts of RR and the Freedom Libraries of the civil rights era as being representative of socially responsible librarianship. They also discuss "coalition-building and community connections" and librarians/libraries' roles in those efforts as evidence of social responsibility. With regard to neutrality, Morrone and Friedman assert the importance of "disput[ing] the notion of detached objectivity in information services and to make room for all levels of library activism both within professional associations and beyond the larger sphere."[29]

It would seem that there is a strong argument in favor of socially responsible librarianship, and, as was noted earlier, this socially responsible approach can be easily integrated into existing services, missions, and visions. How does that address partisanship and neutrality? I'm not sure. Though Morrone and Friedman state that "detached objectivity" must be done away with, I must (somewhat cynically) point out that politics can be hard to dodge at a public university like mine. Like Raber, I think it's safe to say that "this is not an easy question and it deserves constant attention,"[30] and it may well depend, as Curley observed, on whether one is "speaking of libraries, librarians, or librarianship."[31]

Traditional Volunteerism

Quite apart from these larger questions of libraries and social responsibility, nothing prohibits librarians and library staff from traditional venues of volunteerism. Donating blood, money, supplies, resources, and time are still good ways of expressing support in times of crisis. They are not less because they do not employ one's specific skill set. And we mustn't forget that sometimes there's simply not a way to apply one's professional skills to a crisis. What's important, ultimately, is *helping*.

Helping in any meaningful way has obvious benefits, of course. Those affected by a crisis get the help they need, whether that's in the shape of material goods, moral support, or *mortal* support – in the case of Boston, there was a great demand for blood, and the media noted how many of the runners who completed the race immediately left the race site to donate blood. The benefit of blood donation cannot be underestimated at all.

But the benefits to those who volunteer are great, too, quite apart from the gratitude and appreciation of those that they've helped. Dawn McLoughlin and Ruth Wilson, writing on volunteering in the community, noted how volunteering builds the morale of volunteers; allows participants to make new contacts within their community; creates a "sense of motivation and satisfaction"; can get one outside of one's "'day to day' routine; and enable team-building.[32] Essentially – and not to sound too trite – volunteering is a win-win situation.

Conclusion

Librarians can help, using their librarian toolkits or just their basic humanity. Libraries can be institutions of assistance simply by providing access to information, but there are often concerns regarding unserved or underserved populations, and how access to information can be facilitated in times of physical crisis like hurricanes. There are also concerns regarding the role of the library and librarians in social responsibility and neutrality, but it's clear that librarians can teach users to be responsible consumers of information.

Ultimately, I think it's about *context*, as Curley pointed out. Public libraries may be more accountable in political contexts than say academic libraries; academic libraries

might have more intellectual freedoms but more monetary restrictions (and even some

political concerns). Librarians might struggle with institutional loyalty versus their own

principles. Librarianship – like the library institution – might struggle with how far it

should provide assistance or proactively involve itself in social or political movements.

But there are ways to help that go beyond political or social movements. There

are obvious arguments *for* helping out in times of crisis. And I think it's these obvious

ways to help, and these obvious arguments, that can guide us towards how we can help in

times of crisis.

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[1] Editorial Board, "Editorial: Our Philosophies of Librarianship," *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*, October 17, 2012 (http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2012/editorial-our-philosophies-of-librarianship/)

[2] Douglas Raber, "ACONDA and ANACONDA: Social Change, Social Responsibility, and Librarianship," *Library Trends* 55, no. 3: 675-697 (2007), accessed April 17, 2013.

[3] Patricia Schuman, "Libraries and Coalition Building," in *Libraries, Coalitions, & the Public Good*, ed. E. J. Josey (New York: Neal-Schuman, 1987), 131.

[4] Tara Brabazon, "Burning Towers and Ashen Learning: September 11 and the Changes to Critical Literacy," *The Australian Library Journal* 54, no. 1: 6-22 (2005), accessed April 17, 2013.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Esther Rosenfeld, "Helping Libraries," *Teacher Librarian* 33, no. 2: 6 (2005), accessed April 17, 2013.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Adelaide Myers Fletcher, "No Point of Reference: A Hurricane of Medical Information Needs," *Journal of Hospital Librarianship* 6, no. 2 (2006): 1-14, accessed April 17, 2013.

[12] Ya-Ling Lu, "Coping Assistance vs. Readers' Advisory: Are They the Same Animal?"

Children and Libraries 6, no. 1 (2008): 15-22, accessed April 17, 2013.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Renee Rude and Robert Hauptman, "ON MY MIND – To Serve the Unserved: Social Responsibility in the Academy," *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 15, no. 6 (1990): 364, accessed April 17, 2013.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Judith Segal, "The Academic Library and Social Responsibility: A Focus on AIDS," *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 17, no. 4 (1991): 224-229, accessed April 17, 2013.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Raber, "ACONDA and ANACONDA."

[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Melissa Morrone and Lia Friedman, "Radical Reference: Socially Responsible Librarianship Collaborating with Community," *The Reference Librarian* 50 (2009): 371-396, accessed April 17, 2013.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Raber, "ACONDA and ANACONDA."

[31] Ibid.

[32] Dawn McLoughlin and Ruth Wilson, "Painting the Roses Red: Volunteering in the Community," *New Review of Academic Librarianship* 13, no. 1-2 (2007): 71-78, accessed April 17, 2013.