



THE RADICAL LIBRARIAN

Librarians have long suffered under the stereotype of quiet and acquiescent preservers of the status quo. But as EMILY JOHNS points out, librarians have so often agitated for, and been in the vanguard of, change. Sometimes even risking their lives to ensure that everyone can get access to information.

The pervasive view of librarians as meek and mild mannered is false – as most stereotypes tend to be. Information professionals have a long history of advocating for the rights of citizens to access information. Whether fighting against censorship, monitoring copyright issues, advocating for intellectual freedom and privacy, or facilitating comic book days, makerspaces and Pokémon Go meetups, librarians are not always what they seem.

Earlier this year I was given the opportunity through the Melbourne City of Literature Travel Fund to attend the National Institute of the Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC). The event was scheduled to be held in Charlotte, North Carolina, last September. After the state legislature passed a law prohibiting access to public bathrooms based on biological sex, effectively discriminating against transgender people, the conference was cancelled in protest. While disappointed at the lost opportunity, I supported the decision of the American Library Association (ALA) and it prompted me to reflect on the active role that we, as information professionals, are sometimes called upon to play in protecting the civil and social rights of the public we

serve. Respect for all people is clearly the rationale behind the ALA's boycott, making a radical statement against authority by upholding the profession's core beliefs. Librarians manifestly do not stand idly by while human rights and the core values of their profession are being undermined.

The surprised reaction upon learning that librarians are an unexpected source of protest or political engagement is perhaps a reflection of the widely propagated image of the librarian as quiet and conservative that we see in mainstream media portrayals. In reality, libraries have a long history of fighting authority. As institutions with the purpose of facilitating free access to information and ideas, they often face pressure from sources of authority. Librarians are at the frontline in the battle for intellectual freedom, whether under repressive political regimes, such as in Mali, where books were recently hidden by a librarian from invading al-Qaeda forces or by overzealous parents who want their children protected from what they perceive as scandalous material.

Librarians often find themselves at the forefront of social and political issues while advocating on behalf of their users. The very existence of ALIA's Freedom of Access to Information and Resources (FAIR) initiative shows how large a part of the information profession's role that lobbying and advocacy are. A recent example of an information access issue that Australian librarians have engaged with is the signing of the Marrakesh VIP Treaty in 2013, an agreement aimed at ensuring wider access to information for people who are blind, vision impaired or

print disabled. And in 2015, the Cooking for Copyright campaign got librarians all over the country challenging outdated copyright laws and calling for reform by very publicly breaking the law and using social media to draw attention and support. But even in the everyday provision of services, libraries are working to create better outcomes for society at a grassroots level.

In addition to taking on active advocacy roles, many librarians have been doing some pretty radical things in their own spaces. Libraries around the world are now offering opportunities and resources such as makerspaces, 3D printers, film nights, zine workshops, coding clubs, robotics, paste-up sessions, poetry slams, flash mobs, silent disco parties, ping-pong tables, art exhibitions, recording studios and even karaoke. The list could go on. As technology and culture change, so does the library. In engaging people through emerging technology and pop culture, not only do libraries disrupt the boring and fusty stereotype but they also demonstrate a commitment to equitable access to these new opportunities.

Libraries in the 21st century facilitate communities in their lifelong learning goals and have long been offering access to materials deemed subversive or radical, which might offer a counterpoint to the standard curriculum taught in schools. Libraries can introduce people to ideas outside the mainstream. This can be seen in the increasing inclusion of zine collections in public and academic libraries, and by simply looking at the huge range of content available to anyone with a library card. Giving people who feel they don't fit within the mainstream the resources and a space in which to participate in learning and the community is an important part of why libraries exist. Librarians can be considered subversive on account of their unwillingness to censor and their unwavering belief that individuals can and should make up their own minds about what they want to read.

Librarians have always been disrupters. The public library is the most democratic of institutions – free and open to everyone. It can also be one of the most progressive public services, providing access to countercultural and subversive literature and programming. The stereotype of the quiet and conservative librarian is clearly contrary to the reality. Librarians, in their roles as facilitators of open access to information and as innovative leaders in their communities, are radical agitators for change. 

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