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Foreword: Libraries Promoting Reflective Dialogue in a Time of Political Polarization

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Foreword

Jonathan Cope

The day after graduation ceremonies, I find myself walking across a freshly empty campus to the library I work in. As I approach my office to begin this essay, the serenity of this gorgeous, sunny spring day is punctured by the sounds of an angry-sounding man emanating from a nearby minivan. At first, I think there might be an argument occurring inside the van, but as I approach, I recognize a timbre and pacing that would probably be familiar to anyone who grew up in much of America in the 1990s—it’s the voice of the popular conservative radio host Rush Limbaugh. As I write, the man—who I had initially thought was yelling inside the van—may well still be sitting quietly outside in the parking lot listening to “Rush.”

In 1957 Hannah Arendt observed that the process of modernity has created “a global present,” but that “this common factual present is not based on a common past and does not in the least guarantee a common future. Technology, having provided the unity of the world, can just as easily destroy it.”¹ Arendt called this *negative solidarity*: when a few leaders on the other side of the globe can decide that, say, using atomic weapons is justified—thus threatening all of humanity—it produces a solidarity based only on a common interest that such weapons not be used and “a common desire that the world be a little less unified.”² I share a common present with the man in the minivan listening to Rush Limbaugh—who has claimed that there is no evidence that human-caused global warming exists.³ I firmly believe that the evidence for human-caused global warming is overwhelming and that if we do not act in the coming years to address this problem, the potential human and environmental consequences will be unimaginable. Perhaps one sentiment that both I and the Limbaugh-listening man share is that we do not share a polity; in other words, that we do not share a common factual present.

For many in our profession, the 2016 election of Donald Trump signaled a crisis of truth. Here was a political figure who cared little about empirical claims (e.g., fact-checking website PolitiFact ruled that 70 percent of his campaign statements were false).⁴ After the election, news stories emerged of social networking platforms like Facebook and Twitter being barraged with fake accounts spewing deliberate misinformation; outlets were awash in stories about “fake news.”⁵ As librarians, we are trained to verify facts and to share our sources; yet as the traditional sources of news and political information (e.g., newspapers, major tele-

vision networks) shrink in circulation and audience, more brazenly partisan and sensationalist information sources (e.g., Fox News, internet clickbait) seem to fill the void. It increasingly feels as if our polity is not divided by different solutions to common problems, but by the fact that we disagree about what constitutes problems at all. What does constructive dialogue even look like in this context? For whom, and for what purposes, would such dialogue be constructive? Let's take the example of human-caused global warming. Large organizations (e.g., oil companies) have spent lots of money to ceaselessly be "in dialogue" with the public on the topic. They hope to resolve the conflict over human-caused climate change in their favor because their profits would be diminished if we as a society act collectively to address global warming. A small group of people on the planet disproportionately benefits from fossil fuel profits, and yet they are able to exert an enormous amount of influence in the debate due to the massive amounts of capital at their disposal. As this example illustrates, to denude such conflicts of their social and political dimensions and to hope that dialogue across differences alone can help to "bridge the divide" is to misdiagnose the causes of much of the conflict currently occurring. In writing about diversity as the dominant mode of antiracist discourse in LIS, David James Hudson called for treating "the relations of racialized difference and power in LIS as extensions of, rather than separate from, the systems of racial domination that characterize society more broadly."⁶ Broadening this line of analysis to include other forms of exploitation and oppression would mean situating libraries as social institutions within specific societies shaped by a combination of material and ideological forces. If library and information studies is to be a part of a larger democratic project, it must build from an analytical base that sees libraries as institutions that can be empowered to address the inequalities that shape society. Only then can LIS begin to debate and theorize what libraries can or should do to create a more participatory public sphere. If LIS is going to think about how to use libraries to strengthen democracy, then we must think more carefully about what, exactly, we mean by democracy and how libraries as social institutions can, or cannot, develop the capacities of people to publically reason about and shape their world. For example, why should libraries be "in dialogue" with the local Ku Klux Klan? In whose interest would that dialogue occur? Moreover, if libraries as institutions can't confront the authoritarian populist, racist, and xenophobic movements whose stated aim is the antipluralist ethnic cleansing of our communities, then how can we expect those same communities to feel invested in our survival as an institution?

After a short period of Atlantic Western triumphalism at the end of the Cold War in the 1990s, the "uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions" and "everlasting uncertainty and agitation," to quote from Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels's *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, seem to be the order of the day,⁷ particularly for major media commentators in the United States and Europe. Social instability and the uprooting of communities and traditions have been integral to the processes of modernity. A key faith of the Enlightenment in the eighteenth-cen-

tury Atlantic West was that individual expression in the public realm will result in listening, dialogue, and mutual understanding—a “universal commercial society of self-interested rational individuals.”⁸ Yet the communicative and technological developments that champions promised would open up the marketplace of ideas have seemed to careen out of control.

Pankaj Mishra argued that technology and a relentlessly expanding global capitalism have pushed people with very different pasts together into a common present. This has resulted in societies around the globe with immensely unequal distributions of wealth and power in which these inequalities are “rendered more claustrophobic by digital communications, the improved capacity for envious and resentful comparison... [coupled with] the commonplace, and therefore compromised, quest for individual distinction and singularity.”⁹ Mishra feels that we are entering a kind of complex global civil war, the scope and scale of which we can only dimly comprehend. Building institutions that can facilitate some kind of dialogue across difference seems essential. Yet, in order to do this, we must rethink what we mean by dialogue. This book is an attempt by librarians to do just that.

The essays in this volume represent a community of concerned library professionals trying to come to terms with these questions. In his examination of modernity, Marshall Berman maintains that both Arendt and Marx “never developed a theory of political community” and argues that this “turns out to be a trouble that runs through the whole structure of modern life itself.”¹⁰ If thinkers like Marx and Arendt were not able to theorize modern political community, librarians may be forgiven if we do not find all-encompassing and satisfying answers to these questions. After all, the *philosophes* of the eighteenth-century European Enlightenment who popularized the modern political liberalism that shapes how we think about political speech and dialogue today shared a society with the European “propagandists” of the African slave trade who maintained that the African slave was “happier” in the Americas. Writing of this in 1938, C. L. R. James reminded us that “ours, too is an age of propaganda. We excel our ancestors only in system and organization: they lied as fluently and as brazenly.”¹¹ I mention this to emphasize that whatever abstract ideals about open speech and dialogue we as librarians may want to espouse, we exist in a society structured by myriad conflicts and inequalities that cannot be simply talked through. Politics is an indeterminate debate about how to best arrange society. When people have deeply conflicting values and material interests, conflict is inevitable. Moreover, it was only with the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965 that the United States became something resembling a universal liberal democracy—I am skeptical that dialogue alone will do much to address the most pressing problems that we confront today.

At their best, libraries are an expression of the idea that enough of us can reason together about our common world and future. There are several chapters in this book in which the authors reflect upon the direct experience of living near hateful violence (e.g., there is a chapter about responding to the white supremacist violence in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2017) or how having a marginalized

identity can conflict with “libraries values” about dialogue that often assume that straight white cis maleness is neutral and somehow “nonideological.” Reasoning together is something very different from trying to engage in dialogue with movements and ideologies that are based on the notion that some people and voices are illegitimate. The Nazis and Klan members who attacked Charlottesville are ideologically committed to prevent reasoning together. What libraries are legally obligated to do is a very different question from with whom librarians should be in dialogue. We should recall that the American Library Association’s *Library Bill of Rights* was first adopted in 1939, when Nazi Germany was at the apogee of its power.¹² How should questions related to free speech be approached when avowed white supremacists openly admit that they do not believe in free speech but tactically use it as an issue to generate attention and new audiences?¹³ The problems of 2018 may well require educative private spaces of withdrawal and regroupment and public spaces of debate and conflict, as demonstrated in this volume.

A cliché that is currently repeated is that we live in the age of populism. What does this populism mean for those of us embedded within institutions whose existence is dedicated to pluralism and the normative commitment to the belief that democracy requires institutions that can facilitate reasoning together, in public, about the world? A key part of Jan-Werner Müller’s definition of populism is that populists propose a “true, singular legitimate people” in whose interest they govern.¹⁴ It is fundamentally antipluralist, in that it discursively requires the construction of one universal, “true” people who are indistinguishable from the nation. For authoritarian populists, “All other political competitors are illegitimate.”¹⁵ Müller importantly pointed out that the use of antielitist rhetoric is not sufficient to make one a populist; it is the use of this antipluralism. If the democratic forms of exchange that we as librarians would like to foster are explicitly pluralist, then the antipluralism of authoritarian populism is not something that we can easily address.

It is tempting for librarians to gaze out upon the conflicts that currently roil our politics and to believe that reasserting our roles in teaching students the ability to distinguish fact from opinion is our core task. Of course, in our classrooms and at our reference desks, we must continue to emphasize the importance of empirical reality. Yet we would be wise to remove the halos of neutrality from around our heads. In his writings about modernity, Marshall Berman detailed Marx’s specific focus on professionals and intellectuals. Berman outlined Marx’s observation that “even though they tend to pride themselves on their emancipated and thoroughly secular minds, they turn out to be the only moderns who really believe that they are called to their vocations and that their work is holy.”¹⁶ Marx’s point was not to disparage intellectual work as unimportant or entirely subservient to capital, but to point out that “in bourgeois society nobody can be so pure or safe or free.”¹⁷ Without a substantive politics and platform that can address systemic inequalities, it will be difficult to respond to the forces of blood-and-soil nationalism who find voice in the authoritarian populism now ascendant on the right.

The labor-organizer-turned-scholar Jane McAlevey argued that religious institutions and workplaces are the two key social realms where people routinely come together to form political community.¹⁸ Particularly as media become more and more concentrated and less regulated, and as work becomes more temporary and contingent, the unmediated spaces in which strangers meet are becoming fewer. The commentators John Nichols and Robert McChesney have argued that the major daily newspapers and media corporations that once covered local news and politics, “after running journalism into the ground, have determined that news gathering and reporting are not profit-making propositions.”¹⁹ In short, the market is not serving the informational needs of our communities. Few institutions in American life garner as much trust as libraries still do, yet fewer public institutions are dedicated to informing the American public about the goings-on in their communities or promoting history and culture. What if librarians saw dialogue more like community organizing? What if we saw our historical task as librarians to be growing and defending our institutions as public goods? Rather than going out of our way to engage in some kind of abstract dialogue with movements openly opposed to a pluralist society (and by extension, libraries with a pluralist public mission), what if we focused on the conversations that are not being had? How do we share and spread the voices of people and communities historically excluded from the halls of power, while building the power of those communities to actively reason together and shape the world? What are the specific stands that libraries as institutions, and librarians as workers, should take in order to empower these voices?

I do not pretend to have definitive answers to these questions. The essays in this book suggest different, and sometimes conflicting, answers. That is as it should be. What is clear to me is that it is very limiting to see dialogue as a simple meeting in the middle of two opposing factions, the nostrums of major American newspaper op-ed columnists notwithstanding. Libraries are not, and never have been, neutral; they are always embedded within specific societies and political economies. In truth, I do not know how to be in dialogue with the Limbaugh-listening man in the parking lot. As I write, the West Coast of the United States is choking on the smoke of wildfires fueled by the hottest July ever recorded in California.²⁰ I suspect that the Limbaugh-listening man has his “facts,” and I doubt that there is much that I could do to convince him of the urgent necessity to immediately curb carbon emissions to contain the worst impacts of global climate change. It feels as if media and communications technology is bringing us closer together into a shared global present, while simultaneously pushing us further apart. Yet acquiescing to his worldview is not an option—the safety of so many is at stake. If we believe that our common future necessitates social institutions that can help us to publicly reason together, then we need libraries. How to best publicly reason together given the realities that we must urgently confront remains an open question.

NOTES

1. Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), 83.
2. Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, 83.
3. J. M. Rieger, "As Florence Approaches, Rush Limbaugh Continues His Tradition of Conflating Weather and Climate," *Washington Post*, September 13, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2018/09/13/florence-approaches-rush-limbaugh-continues-his-tradition-conflating-weather-climate/>.
4. Aaron Sharockman, "The Truth (So Far) behind the 2016 Campaign," PolitiFact, June 29, 2016, <https://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/article/2016/jun/29/fact-checking-2016-clinton-trump/>.
5. Barbara Alvarez, "Public Libraries in the Age of Fake News," *Public Libraries* 55, no. 6 (2016): 24–27.
6. David James Hudson, "On 'Diversity' as Anti-racism in Library and Information Studies: A Critique," *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 1, no. 1: (2017): 26, <https://doi.org/10.24242/jclis.v1i1.6>.
7. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978), 476.
8. Pankaj Mishra, *Age of Anger* (New York: Picador, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017), 7.
9. Mishra, *Age of Anger*, 13.
10. Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air* (New York: Penguin, 1988), 128.
11. C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins* (New York: Random House, Vintage Books Edition, 1989), 7.
12. Emily Knox, Joyce Latham, and Candace Morgan, "History of Intellectual Freedom and Censorship" (webinar presented by the American Library Association Office of Intellectual Freedom, November 10, 2016), video, 1:03:42, <http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/webinar/history>.
13. Jared Holt, "Richard Spencer: The Alt-Right Is Not Pro-Free Speech," Right Wing Watch, May 23, 2018, <http://www.rightwingwatch.org/post/richard-spencer-the-alt-right-is-not-pro-free-speech/>.
14. Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).
15. Müller, *What Is Populism?* 101.
16. Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*, 116.
17. Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*, 119.
18. Jane McAlevey, *No Shortcuts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).
19. John Nichols and Robert W. McChesney, "How to Save Journalism: The Patriotic Case for Government Action," *Nation* 290, no. 3 (2010): 11–16.
20. Jason Samenow, "On Fire: July Was California's Hottest Month Ever Recorded," *Washington Post*, August 9, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/capital-weather-gang/wp/2018/08/09/on-fire-july-was-californias-hottest-month-ever-recorded/>.

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