

## Librarians as Agents of Change

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### abstract

Many years ago, Elizabeth Eisenstein wrote *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*, arguing that the technology of the printing press had an unexpected revolutionary effect on culture and society. In this talk, I will invite us to explore the ways that libraries and the values they embody offer a challenge to the dominant narratives of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. We will unpack the meanings of the word “change” and how it has been used in shaping the organizational culture of libraries and institutions of higher learning, we will consider “agency” as it relates to information literacy and student learning, and we will explore the ways that librarians can participate in advocating not just for libraries, but for the values a library embodies.

In 1979, Elizabeth Eisenstein published an influential [book](#), *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*, pointing out the many unexpected and mostly unacknowledged ways that a new technology influenced society, making it possible to preserve and share knowledge so that new ideas could be built on it by all kinds of people who previously had been left out. We’re living through another time when technology is changing the way we think about knowledge, but today I want to focus on ourselves as agents of change.

I think we librarians have more power than we realize. We often fail to recognize our own power because we are so very cognizant of unequal power dynamics and our professional commitment to reducing powerlessness. Exerting power, claiming attention, even having strong opinions seem at times to be at odds with our desire to serve and our commitment to providing information of all kinds without questioning people’s motives. Yet asserting our power can be totally consistent with our values; uncritically providing information, whatever the cost, can actually betray them.

Today I want to talk about the metaphors we use when we talk about what we do and what we want to do differently. I want to think through the implications of these metaphors for teaching and learning and for the role that librarians play in the making and sharing of knowledge. But since we are also talking about telling our stories out loud, I will start by telling a few of my own before we venture into more abstract territory.

In high school, I took an English course which included learning how to write a research paper. I had recently read Josephine Tey’s mystery *The Daughter of Time*, which had convinced me that poor Richard III had been framed for the murder of his nephews. When I handed in my first draft, a thick wad of paper, Mrs. Beard (bless her demanding heart) read the first page and said, “no, this isn’t research. You have to ask a question.” I had been merely retelling the history of Richard III as told by his champions. I had started with an answer. So I started over, found as much of the primary source material as I could,

and rewrote the paper. By the time I was finished I had concluded he was probably guilty. That was important for me, because I discovered research might change minds.

In my first semester at college, I was assigned a paper in my philosophy course. People were writing about philosophers, about philosophy topics, about whatever they could find in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. I decided to write about an issue that seemed philosophical, but I didn't know what philosophers called it, so I couldn't look it up. (It was the Mind-Body Problem.) Everyone got their papers back but me. The teacher told me to see him after class. He told me it was a good paper, it just wasn't a philosophy paper. I had to start over. Rather than explain what a philosophy paper was, he advised me to look at the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. I summarized what it said about St. Anselm's proof of the existence of God, about which I cared not one bit, and finally got my grade. That was the last philosophy course I took.

When I was a little further along in college, I took an art history course which was cross-listed for graduate students. I got into mimicking their pompous, wordy nerdiness. I had fun doing the research for my paper, but wrote with my tongue in cheek, making it as absurdly pompous as possible. I made the title as long as possible: Hiberno-Saxon Eusabian Canon Tables and Their East Mediterranean Prototypes. I got an A. I had become a successful imposter.

My actual major was Russian literature. It turns out if you like reading big fat novels and writing papers, it's a fine choice. I never got very good at Russian grammar and syntax, but I got to read a lot of big fat novels in translation, my idea of a good time. But when I took a course on Dostoevsky, I hit a snag. When the teacher got a novel I loved, *The Idiot*, he pretty much skipped over it, saying he really didn't get that novel, he couldn't see how it fit into the author's body of work, and he just didn't like it. After class I went up and told him it was the best of Dostoevsky's novels, and was the key to everything. He said "great, explain it to me in your paper."

Okay.

Unfortunately, while I was certain the novel was full of meaning, I wasn't actually sure what that meaning was. And I had a really hard time getting started. I looked at everything I could find in the library on the novel, but it didn't help. I stared at the book and the blank page and the calendar and finally began to write, because I was running out of time. And the minute I started writing, I found the key to the whole thing. It was all in a painting that was mentioned several times in the novel. Yes! I cracked it! And it flowed. It flowed, because I was so deeply invested in saying something that hadn't been said before. It flowed because making a case for the novel mattered to me. And it was intoxicating, at least until I had to type the darned thing up, with a bucket of white out at my side. That was an exhilarating experience. Even though I enjoyed writing papers, this one was different. It mattered in a way nothing else had. And when the teacher told me it gave him a new respect for the novel, and a new way to think about it, that reward meant far more than a grade. I had become a contributor to the conversation about Dostoevsky. I felt a sense of agency I had never felt before.

As a librarian, I want students to have that moment of recognition: *I matter, I am a part of this, this is a conversation that includes me*. Research isn't about finding the answers. It's about asking questions that may not have an answer until you put your mind to it. When students have that moment, and many of them do, it's a time when their whole world pivots. They see themselves differently. They recognize their role in the world of ideas. They join the conversation. This is, for me, the greatest reward of being an academic librarian.

I want to help faculty invite students to that moment. I want to make the library a site of transformation. I want to change the metaphors.

What metaphors am I talking about? We tend to think of information as stuff that is manufactured somewhere else, stuff we acquire, store, and exchange. It's a valuable commodity, and the most successful libraries are the ones that provide an efficient and pleasant customer experience. Students come to library to shop for sources, full of nutritious authority – authority that only exists outside themselves. The library's website is a more or less confusing shopping platform for those nuggets of authority. Faculty and administrators also see research as monetized stuff; publications are tokens of productivity, to be exchanged for job security, grants, and prestige. Students are consumers. Faculty are brands to be developed. Education is either an industry or an investment, depending on whether you are a producer or consumer. It's all about production and consumption.

Let's back up a minute and think about how the cultural significance of the library has evolved over time. We have always used metaphors and they have always expressed something profound about our underlying beliefs.

In the past, [according to Scott Bennett](#), libraries were about readers, mostly solitary men, in a monastic world where books were rare and special, conducive to contemplation. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the US, the public library became a civic project, a place that welcomed all comers in an effort to make them better educated. There was an interesting mix of populist, domestic, and enlightenment messages in the public library, which invited all to the library, but listed the important writers who should be honored, conveying a somewhat mixed message. The Boston Public Library has, in addition to its iconic FREE TO ALL inscription the statement THE COMMONWEALTH REQUIRES THE EDUCATION OF THE PEOPLE AS THE SAFEGUARD OF ORDER AND LIBERTY. So the public library had two seemingly conflicting functions – to preserve order and to promote freedom. I can actually see how those two things remain important in libraries. We organize the books on the shelves so that conflicting ideas sit side by side. We want them to have a good brawl.

In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century the glory of the academic library was its size, the bigger, the better. That got too expensive to maintain, and we began instead to brag about how much access to information we could provide. It relieved us of the problem of managing the stuff, but the sentiment remained: when it came to full text journals, the more the merrier. At the same time, we began to take our cues from retail shopping. We strove to make our spaces look more like Barnes and Nobles (whose décor was inspired by

traditional library motifs). We tried to make our search more like Amazon and Google. Our main function was to pay for whatever our customers want.

Ranganathan's Laws of Library Science have been reinvented to reflect market-based assumptions.

- Not "books are for use," but "Information is for sale."
- Not "every reader, his or her book" but "Every customer, consumer choice."
- Not "every book, its reader," but "Every product, market exposure."
- Not "save the time of the reader," but "Improve the customer experience."
- Not "the library is a growing organism," but "the library must grow its market or die."

We have so thoroughly absorbed the market-driven philosophy of human behavior that we forget that there are other ways human beings have interacted. These underlying assumptions have profoundly influenced our thinking about what libraries are for and how they are used.

The Library Bill of Rights is a multifaceted document that spells out a number of important values that we feel should be protected in libraries for the greater good. But we haven't done a good job of making those values public and a shared concern. We don't spend time explaining why privacy still matters in an era where the commercial web runs on micropayments of personal information. We don't make a case for universal and equitable information access as we wring our hands over license agreements and try to negotiate better deals. The most recent [lthaka report](#) on what faculty want from libraries showed that they increasingly feel our most important function is "to pay the bills for the stuff I need."

Unfortunately, we have begun to feel it is our duty and calling to provide information on demand. We've lost some of the rich social meaning of libraries when it's all about delivering products efficiently to customers.

The language we use about libraries and the future is often dystopian and apocalyptic, full of death threats: adapt or die; libraries are screwed; change or become obsolete. Think about the keywords that are so often used: customers, value propositions, product mix, competition, obsolescence. When I look around my library, I see a lot of students working, talking, snoozing, searching, studying. They aren't looking nervously over their shoulder, expecting doom. They aren't wondering when the asteroid will hit and we'll suffer the fate of the dinosaurs. They use Google and Amazon, but they don't see them as in competition with the library. They like the library. It belongs to them. They like it because it's the college's common ground.

We hear, often enough, that there is something inherently tragic about commons. Like libraries, they are almost by definition doomed, except when we look around and see that they are actually thriving. Garrett Hardin declared the commons tragic in a [1968 essay in Science](#), in which he argued that people are inherently selfish, that we're not good at allowing nature to take its course and let poor babies starve to death, and that means the lower classes will take advantage of this conundrum to "overbreed for their own aggrandizement." He believed that overpopulation was a critical threat, and that we couldn't merely rely on access to birth control to control population growth in the third world. (As he

put it succinctly if insensitively, “freedom to breed will bring ruin to us all”). To make his point, he showed how grazing lands and fisheries collapsed when individual interests collided with the need to promote sustainability. He argued that this was evidence that people are unable to share wisely, so their behavior must be regulated by the state or by the invisible hand of private interests. Nobel prize winning economist Eleanor Ostrom disagreed. She studied successful commons and [found that actually they can work](#), even when the resources being called upon might be exhausted if mismanaged.

But even with Eleanor Ostrom on the side of the commons, we bizarrely continue to use artificial scarcity and depletion metaphors for ideas, which unlike fish or pastureland are not exhausted through sharing. The inexhaustible nature of ideas is something Thomas Jefferson [grasped](#) long ago when he argued against the state granting generous monopolies over inventions.

*If nature has made any one thing less susceptible than all others of exclusive property, it is the action of the thinking power called an idea . . . He who receives an idea from me, receives instruction himself without lessening mine; as he who lights his taper at mine, receives light without darkening me. That ideas should freely spread from one to another over the globe, for the moral and mutual Instruction of man, and improvement of his condition, seems to have been peculiarly and benevolently designed by nature . . . like the air in which we breathe, move, and have our physical being, incapable of confinement or exclusive appropriation."*

The tragedy of the commons isn't that people are inherently selfish and will spoil it for everyone, given the chance, it's that we think commons are impossible, unaffordable, inevitably subject to ruin through greed and selfishness, and in that spirit our intellectual commons have been enclosed, made into private property, made artificially scarce. But let's remember, it's not even a free market at work. The way we currently manage the record of knowledge is not like a well-managed estate built on the messy remains of a tragic commons; it's more like a giant agribusiness. We artificially prop the information industries up with price supports, even as we know what we're doing is unhealthy and unsustainable. It was enormously symbolic when the APA updated their citation rules, requiring writers to include either publisher-supplied DOIs or URLs to publishers' websites as the information needed to recover a text, even if that made authors' "retrieved from" statement a lie. They have positioned publishers (like themselves) as the curators and source of knowledge. Libraries are merely local franchises. This is a shift in our metaphors that is significant. We need to reclaim and reopen the commons of knowledge.

Another keyword that has gotten a workout in our post-industrial age is "change." Often, change is held over us as an imminent threat. It's something that comes from outside that we have to prepare for before it's too late. It's a threat that divides the ready and the unready, a threat only some will survive. In higher education, as you may have noticed, change is depicted as a natural force acting on scarcity. We're told we have to change because we're inefficient, too expensive, not able to compete, likely to be overtaken and replaced by nimble competitors. This is a narrative of fear and austerity that has been used to make competition seem a natural law of the universe, an inescapable force that must dismantle public institutions and redirect public funds into private pockets in order to shift our common wealth to the control of corporations that, by definition, will do a better job of managing it for us.

We don't have to let this happen. Remember, the fifth of Ranganathan's laws was about change. It was about organic change, chance that happens naturally and continually. because the library is a living thing. Corporatization and commodification isn't inevitable. We have changed, and can continue to change, without it being imposed from without. In fact, we have the capacity to make significant and valuable change. Our traditional values, our commitment to sharing and equality and openness, are exactly what this frightened, tattered world needs right now. As librarians, we can be agents of change.

But how? What are the practical steps we can take? That's where it gets tricky. At another conference earlier this month I tossed out some big ideas and afterwards the dominant response from the audience was "this sounds good, but there's really nothing we can do; we librarians have no power." While I recognize that impulse, and I sympathize, I think that's just inaccurate. We have bigger budgets than most academic programs. Collectively, we have enormous financial clout. We also have tremendous cultural capital, given libraries are a significant and respected symbol, a strength we often overlook. We even have some hipster cachet, ever since an FBI agent complained about "radical militant librarians" in the *New York Times*.

What we need to do is resist the displacement of our values in our libraries by market-based philosophies and think hard about what our values really are, how to speak about them out loud, and how to put them into practice in our everyday work. That means we need to make sure that we live our values in our own workplaces. We need to honor intellectual freedom, inclusion, taking risks in the service of knowledge, being open to conflict and questions that don't have easy answers, in our libraries and on our campuses. We need to examine the systems we have come to feel are inexorable and question them critically. Another world is possible, and it can start at home.

The traditional hierarchical library organization is patterned on the factory floor, a place where decisions are made at the top by executives and carried out by the workers, who can't do anything without permission. That factory model obviously doesn't work anymore, if it ever did, so more forward-thinking leaders have tried new things, but unfortunately they seem to get their ideas by reading the *Harvard Business Review* and bestselling management handbooks, rather than looking for a model that's very close by, a model developed over the centuries by people who work together to advance knowledge. While we were busy building teams, throwing fish, and wondering where our cheese was, we overlooked the way that scholars seem almost effortlessly to work together as peers embarked on a common if often contentious communal task. Michael Polanyi called science a "[republic](#)" – one in which each citizen raises the questions that interest them, hoping to fill in some pieces of a puzzle that everyone works on together. If we were to [treat one another as equals](#), as members of a community rather than members of work-teams or as cogs in a big machine, we can have a much better chance as social organizations of rehearsing and living out our values.

Bethany Nowviske wrote [a wonderful piece about digital humanities](#) in an era when the whim of a few top administrators can nearly bring down a public university, as we saw last summer at the University of Virginia, where she works. One thing she said that I wanted as a tattoo was "existential threats don't

scare us. We're librarians!" But she went on to talk about why digital humanities belong in libraries, and what she says applies to all kinds of work done in libraries.

*The extent to which we can have an effective prospect on the future depends on our continued ability to do retrospective work. And this means not only preserving our collections and thinking carefully about the ways that we re-mediate them, but it also means understanding what it is to make and build and transmit and share. What, in fact, it means to transmit knowledge by making and building .. .*

*We make things because that's how we understand. We make things because that's how we pass them on, and because everything we have was passed on to us as a made object. We make things in digital humanities because that's how we interpret and conserve our inheritance. Because that's how we can make it all anew.*

As we do this work, as we defend our most important values, we need to remember they are shared, they are bigger than our buildings, bigger than our profession. Values, like ideas, are not depleted by sharing. We don't have to worry that we're in competition for market share with Google when what we're promoting is our ever-so-shareable values.

So what might this look like in practice?

- For the student, we could help them stop thinking in terms of producing papers to exchange for a grade and instead help them become passionate about ideas, ideas they want to share. We can work with faculty to help students frame inquiry as conversation, as an invitation to authentic learning that is so much more inviting than "ten double-spaced pages using five scholarly sources." We have power because we see students at work, and we can help faculty learn from our observations. Not only would they love to have better papers to grade, they really want students to benefit from their assignments. This is possible.
- For our faculty and their own scholarship, we can help them shift the conversation from being productive individuals whose work is measured in publications to being active citizens in a republic of knowledge. They want their work to matter, not just to count toward their productivity quotas. This is possible.
- For librarians, we can change our public identity from being a purchasing agent and a middleman delivering commodities from the vast corporate farms of knowledge, to being a master gardener cultivating our local gardens, with an eye on the health of our global knowledge ecosystem.

- For the library itself, we can stop thinking about it as a retail outlet and shopping platform and instead think about how it can foster a community based on making and sharing, a local node in the global knowledge commons.

What's daunting is that we are individuals and small communities struggling to provide day by day against enormous odds, trying to tell our story, which doesn't fit the dominant narrative. When I went to a workshop on libraries and publishing a couple of years ago, I got terribly discouraged. The problem seemed too huge, the progress too small. Instead of changing the paradigm of publishing, people were getting bogged down in policies and procedures and processes. But I soon realized that I had to focus on what I could do. I'm trying to make a difference in small ways at my small library, trying to live my values. Our values.

These can be exercised on a small and human scale. One little thing we're doing at my library is starting a circulating zine collection, to provide access to alternative voices, to show alternative approaches to publishing, to give students an invitation to participate in DIY culture. I think it's fitting that I found something Cindy Crabb wrote at the end of [an anthology](#) of her collected zines inspiring. In her "outraduction" she wrote

*Do you believe in happy endings? Because sometimes they do happen. Something inside shifts, something outside comes together, and your fight becomes more purposeful, your rest becomes more restful, your hurt becomes something you can bear, and your happiness becomes something that shines out with ease, not in lightning manic bursts that fill and then drain you, but something else, something steady, something you can almost trust to stay there.*

We need to nurture hope. [Zine critic Alison Piepmeier](#) praises Crabb's refusal to become cynical or to oversimplify complicated things. Through her work, Crabb documents how she creates alternatives by living them, a practice that Piepmeier terms "micropolitical pedagogies of hope" This is the kind of pedagogy that Paolo Freier called "the practice of freedom." Libraries are a perfect place for our students to practice freedom, to gain agency, to learn how to hope.

What Elizabeth Eisenstein was talking about when she talked about the printing press as an agent of change wasn't that it created a new industry, a new supply chain for books, a disruptive innovation. What interested her was not the economics of printing or technological advances, but that this instrument enabled people to rediscover our common intellectual history. It gave us the ability to compare variant editions of classical and sacred texts side by side. To know that, when one person read a book, someone else in another place could be reading the same book, and they could discuss it from a distance. For the first time, we could collect in one room all kinds of ideas that could interact together, and rooms just like it were springing up all over Europe. When the technology of the press could be used to copy texts, people who had been making copies by hand were free to write new texts, and that combination of freedom to do new things and broad access to ideas that had come before was what led to the Reformation and the Enlightenment and all the revolutions that followed. It was profound change, revolutionary in every sense of the word. But what the printing press did is what we do:

preserve the past, make it accessible, and provide the opportunity to build on it. To be sure, those things are at risk today as knowledge is turned into intellectual property, our knowledge commons enclosed. But we can stand up for the commons. We know what's at stake. We know another world is possible. We can be the change we want to see.