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Introduction to "Libraries Promoting Reflective Dialogue in a Time of Political Polarization"

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Introduction

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The idea for this book arose at a specific point in time and place: the winter of 2017, a time of great political polarization in the US. The campaigns and rhetoric of the 2016 US presidential election undeniably reflected a divided country. This tension has seemingly intensified further since the election, making evident conflicts that have long resided under the surface. Amid these social and political tensions, extremist ideologies have often been affirmed, public and political discourse have become even more contentious, and many individuals and groups have felt disenfranchised, marginalized, and silenced.

Libraries, archives, and other educational settings, along with the people who inhabit them, have been deeply affected by this chilly climate. Immediately following the election, as those with extremist ideologies felt emboldened, many students in schools and on college campuses across the country, particularly those from historically marginalized groups, felt less safe on the street, in the classroom, and in dorm rooms. Their fears were not unfounded: just ten days after the election, the Southern Poverty Law Center reported 876 hate incidents, 37 percent of which occurred in K–12 schools, colleges, or universities.[1] Class and campus climates were also significantly affected. According to an SPLC's Teaching Tolerance project survey of over 10,000 K–12 educators in the first days after the election, "Ninety percent of educators report that school climate has been negatively affected, and most of them believe it will have a long-lasting impact. A full 80 percent describe heightened anxiety and concern on the part of students worried about the impact of the election on themselves and their families."[2]

Additionally, as faculty explore their normal, often controversial, lines of inquiry and teach their students, many are being targeted and harassed by radicalized students and community members.[3] Consider, for example, Professor Watchlist, a website created in December 2016 by Turning Point USA in order to identify professors who are viewed as "advanc[ing] leftist propaganda in the classroom."[4] Such organizations have posed a real threat to academic freedom, though efforts like Professor Watchlist have also prompted some scholars to reas-

sert the importance of academic freedom and critical inquiry. These affirmations take courage. Thus, unsurprisingly, writing articles about how to survive a right-wing attack is a growing cottage industry.[5] As hot-button speakers are brought to campuses and vocal demonstrators shut them down, civic conversation appears to be a major casualty.[6]

Many international students and undocumented DACA students remain uncertain if they will be allowed to stay in the US. Some campuses and states have spoken out about these issues, whether in subtle or bold ways. Others have remained silent, often out of an understandable fear of the potential consequences at a time when financial resources are already scarce and when state funding matters.

Access to public information and historical preservation have also become heightened concerns for archivists, librarians, and activists. Many have worked to save government webpages and public files from offices like the Environmental Protection Agency and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, as some of this information has been removed from public view.

In light of such developments, the ALA *Core Values of Librarianship*—principles like access for all, democracy, diversity, intellectual freedom, the public good—have taken on new weight.[7] The argument for library "neutrality" has become a much harder one to make, though that debate still continues.

Many readers may share with us the sense of exhaustion in recalling the numerous indications of a highly polarized country, reflections of what prompted us, the editors, to propose this publication. We did not know exactly what this book would look like; we did know that we were, like many, frustrated and confused. Two of the editors had done previous research around affect and library instruction, and all three recognized the importance of affect in learning and in library and information work more broadly. We were immediately drawn to the effects that these supercharged emotions were having on librarians and library users. The 2016 election and its aftermath brought to the surface a great deal of uncertainty and anxiety not only about the future, but also about where the US and the world are at this moment in time. In the US context, many people clearly wanted and want a change from the status quo, as they have recognized that traditional systems of power are not working for them. Among those are educational and information systems, which throughout history have served some individuals and groups more than others, often while marginalizing others.

This time could have been—and we'd like to believe still can be—a moment for positive social change, for more intentional reflection, listening, and empathy across social groups and identities. And in many corners and pockets, it has been and continues to be. In the face of this confusion, there have been many recent calls across the US and in librarianship for more dialogue: opportunities to look beyond difference at our common humanity, to hear and to empathize with "the other side," and to work for the common good. (Consider, for example, ALA's Libraries Transforming Communities initiative.)[8]

Such calls for dialogue are, in principle, hard to disagree with. The realities, of course, are more complicated. As Jonathan Cope writes in this book's foreword, "What does constructive dialogue even look like in this context? For whom, and for what purposes, would such dialogue be constructive?" How does one engage in "reflective dialogue" when doing so could result in physical or psychological harm to oneself or one's loved ones? How does one listen to and appreciate "the other side" if that side is based on the belief that a given individual or social group is inherently unworthy, or that one's closest relationships are immoral? In some cases, dialogue may not be constructive or desirable. Dialogue has the potential to reinforce unequal power relations and to marginalize certain voices, while appearing to be open and inclusive. On the other hand, the extreme alternative of giving up altogether on dialogue, while perhaps sometimes easier in the short run, closes off a tremendous amount of potential for ourselves, our communities, and our world.

This book won't provide a single or simple definition of dialogue, nor will it offer a quick guide to fostering dialogue in constructive ways (though a number of chapters do offer helpful guidance on facilitating difficult conversations). And, in Cope's words, "That is as it should be." When we put out this book's call for contributions, we sought to keep it open to all areas of libraries and librarianship, with the understanding that dialogue would take different forms and sometimes have different meanings within these various contexts. The fact that one's conception of the term *dialogue* depends greatly on one's environment and community is reflected in the varied understandings of, approaches to, and questions about dialogue that are shared in these chapters.

But we also cannot altogether sidestep the question of what we mean by *reflective dialogue*. There are some qualities of constructive reflective dialogue on which most people are likely to agree. Reflective dialogue asks us to pause before reacting, to notice what's happening in ourselves, to ground ourselves in a sense of compassion for ourselves and others, and with that grounding to open a space to listen and to speak, not with the aim of convincing someone else that we are right, but rather with the goal of recognizing a shared humanity and appreciating difference, as well as the inevitable limitations of our own understanding. We work from the belief that while all dialogue is complex and while reflective dialogue is not always possible in all contexts, it is especially needed in a time of great division.

In fact, just focusing on how this type of dialogue might happen and consciously working toward seeing that it continues to thrive might be one of the most empowering and transformative things we can do at this time. Remaining creative and engaged as we face these challenges will certainly earn us extra style points. Because of the larger political pressures acting out on campuses and in libraries, librarianship may be at a critical juncture. This disruption may shake many of the foundations of our profession, but it may also be a golden opportu-

nity—a time to look at the idea of "library neutrality" in a new and more critical way and perhaps see the library as an undeniably political place. As Cope notes in the foreword, bringing balance into the library could mean asking, "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?"

This book's discussions on librarians and reflective dialogue are expansive, and the methods used in the chapters range from case studies, to essays, to autoethnographies. At the same time that we celebrate this diversity, we also recognize our limitations. All authors work in academic libraries, primarily in the United States (one author works in the United Kingdom). That said, many contributors have extended their dialogic work beyond their academic communities. And while political polarization has taken unique shapes and forms within the US, many of the issues raised in these chapters have relevance across geographic borders. Another limitation of this book, as several authors suggest, is that librarianship has long been a predominantly white, middle-class, cis-gender, and liberal-leaning profession, and this is evident in many, though not all, of the chapters. It is the hope of the editors that, read with the knowledge of these limitations, these chapters, while growing out of a certain time and place, may have relevance and resonance in other locations and in the future as well.

The book is organized into the following four sections:

- Libraries as Dialogic Spaces: Limits and Possibilities
- Dialogue amid Polarization and Extreme Skepticism: Challenges and Opportunities
- Special Collections and Archives: Past and Present in Conversation
- The Information Literacy Classroom: Uneasy Questions, Creative Responses

The descriptions below of each section's contents illustrate the trajectory of this book. Readers are invited to approach the chapters in any order as they gravitate toward issues that are of particular interest and relevance to them.

Libraries as Dialogic Spaces: Limits and Possibilities

The book's opening section, "Libraries as Dialogic Spaces: Limits and Possibilities," includes considerations of libraries as spaces for dialogue and of librarians as catalysts and participants in those spaces. Ione Damasco, working in a situa-

tion conducive to constructive dialogue, shares her and her colleagues' work at the University of Dayton in applying a structured approach to dialogue: intergroup dialogue. In "Creating Meaningful Engagement in Academic Libraries Using Principles of Intergroup Dialogue" (chapter 1), Damasco outlines key stages and strategies of intergroup dialogue and how they were applied to library professional development and to a new campus initiative.

Kelly McElroy and Lindsay Marlow also offer strategies for dialogue-centered workshops for library workers. In "Reflective Dialogue across Difference in Libraries" (chapter 2), they draw on their years of experiences facilitating such events. The authors discuss instances in which "courageous conversations" went well and moments when they have gone astray and offer practical strategies for responding to the challenges and opportunities that such experiences can present. Marlow and McElroy give particular attention to fostering space for voices and experiences that often have been silenced or unheard.

While the preceding chapters focus primarily on concrete strategies for fostering dialogue, the subsequent chapter gives attention not only to ways in which dialogue may create an opening for deeper reflection and thought, but also to conditions under which dialogue may not be possible or desirable. In "Confronting the Limits of Dialogue: Charlottesville, 2017" (chapter 3), Abby Flanigan, Dave Ghamandi, Phylissa Mitchell, and Erin Pappas consider the complexities of libraries as dialogic spaces amid the extreme conditions of the 2017 Charlottesville riots and their aftermath. Their chapter raises complex questions about the possibilities, limitations, and potential dangers of dialogue, particularly in environments in which hate and violence are real physical and emotional threats, especially to historically marginalized groups. Taking an autoethnographic approach that weaves their personal and professional lives and experiences together, the authors consider the implications of such unsettling events for library spaces, programming, and professional practice and values.

In "What It Means to Be Out: Queer, Trans, and Gender Nonconforming Identities in Library Work" (chapter 4), Zoe Fisher, Stephen Krueger, Robin Goodfellow Malamud, and Ericka Patillo discuss the often complex decision about when and how to express one's gender identity or sexual orientation in library workplaces, in particular when this identity exists in tension with certain conceptions of "library neutrality." Reflecting on their different experiences and perspectives (two authors are two academic librarians, one is an LIS graduate student, and the other is an academic library administrator), the authors bring together autoethnography, queer theory, and organizational role theory in order to consider "what it means to be out" when doing so may mean also experiencing conflict or tension in various ways with colleagues or with the library profession.

Dialogue amid Polarization and Extreme Skepticism: Challenges and Opportunities

In the second section, "Dialogue amid Polarization and Extreme Skepticism: Challenges and Opportunities," contributors consider the difficulties of promoting and engaging thoughtfully in dialogue in information environments that are heavily influenced by polarization, distrust, and in many cases extreme skepticism of information sources that have traditionally been considered credible. Some of the authors describe these conditions in terms of "information disorder." These authors also challenge library and information professionals to think beyond the domain of librarianship and to look to the psychological and sociological realms in order to better understand ourselves and our library users.

In "'You Shall Listen to All Sides and Filter Them *from* Yourself': Information Literacy and 'Post-truth' Skepticism" (chapter 5), Christopher Sweet, Jeremy Shermak, and Troy Swanson explore the fractured information landscape of the post-truth era. Moving beyond the external actions of information seeking, they delve into the complex internal psychologies of information users. They posit that what passes for "reasoning" in this extreme environment has less to do with decision-making and reason, and more to do with groupthink and group identity. In the concluding sections of the chapter, they analyze the implications of their findings and share concrete examples of integrating their analysis into library information literacy sessions.

In "Sociology of Information Disorder: An Annotated Syllabus for Informed Citizens" (chapter 6), Hailey Mooney upends a traditional chapter structure and presents her ideas in the form of a class syllabus. In her course structure, Mooney looks at the role that information plays in a democratic society as she provides readings and assignments that encourage students to more adeptly recognize bias in information sources, to reflect upon their own personal information behaviors, and to consider how the social dimensions of information creation and use may impact their own bias and level of awareness. The syllabus goes beyond a simple course pathfinder; it functions as a map of resources that help students learn more about truth decay, government surveillance, credibility, and personal beliefs within a sociological context.

Madeleine Charney, in "Climate Change Conversations in Libraries (A Sabbatical Training Adventure)" (chapter 7), reflects on her work leading workshops centered on environmental issue advocacy within libraries. With a goal to build librarians' capacity to create change in their local communities, Charney's workshops embrace the "World Café" model. This structure is conversation-based: it emphasizes building a welcoming space for groups to tackle hard questions and to "harvest" their brainstormed ideas, which others can then see and respond to.

Charney also includes mindfulness and meditation in her workshop in order to help participants center themselves and their work. Her chapter is a powerful reflection on the possibilities of libraries and librarians as facilitators for social change.

While the first two chapters in this section focus on how students and the public more generally engage with information, in the section's last two chapters the authors also consider how polarization in the library profession can stand in the way of a thoughtful and critical exchange of ideas. In "Not Tolerating Intolerance: Unpacking Critical Pedagogy in Classrooms and Conferences" (chapter 8), librarian Spencer Brayton and media literacy professor Natasha Casey discuss their experiences at conferences on critical information literacy and critical media literacy. They observe a lack of critical dialogue at many of these conferences and argue that the pedagogical approaches stressed at these events often are not effective in classrooms, especially if students' political views do not align with those of the teacher. Brayton and Casey identify parallels between the ways that conversations at professional conferences and in the classroom often shut down, even when participants have good intentions to ask and to explore questions critically. They suggest strategies for how to foster truly critical dialogue both in our teaching and in our professional interactions.

Sarah Hartman-Caverly takes a deep, deep dive into the QAnon Storm conspiracy phenomenon in "'TRUTH Always Wins': Dispatches from the Information War" (chapter 9). This chapter, which blends autoethnography, ethnography, and media critique, will be a vertiginous free fall for many, but for those holding on, it should prove to be a worthwhile ride. By moving to the other side of the looking glass, Sarah, in her anon persona, holds up some interesting reflections to those of us in our academic information literacy universe. After reading this chapter, your ideas about what constitutes research, authority, "us and them," and information literacy may never be the same.

Special Collections and Archives: Past and Present in Conversation

In the third section, "Special Collections and Archives: Past and Present in Conversation," the authors show us that the past exists within the present. Other authors of this volume describe the unique characteristics of our polarized context in the beginning decades of the twenty-first century. But the authors of the chapters in this section also discern the ghosts of the past that are in our midst and interrogate these shadows.

In "Between Accession and Secession: Political Mayhem and Archival Transparency in Charleston, South Carolina" (chapter 10), Aaisha Haykal, Barrye

Brown, and Mary Jo Fairchild grapple with a painful case study in archival accessioning, communication, and ethics. In the best of times and with the best planning and PR, receiving an archival donation of materials from a neo-Confederate organization would be a challenge. Receiving it in Charleston, South Carolina, in 2017—with no advance press to the college or the community—quickly devolved into a major controversy on campus and in the community. These archivists discuss their experiences with this collection. Utilizing the concepts of post-crisis discourse and radical empathy, they share what they and their institution learned about transparency, process, and the need to communicate with constituents not only about new collections, but also about the often controversial nature of archives themselves.

"Red Shirts and Citizens' Councils: Special Collections and Information Literacy in the College Classroom" (chapter 11), by Nathan Saunders, illustrates how history can be used to illuminate the present. Also based in South Carolina, Nathan sheds light on how controversial archival collections can serve librarians and teaching faculty, both in teaching students how to use primary sources and in creating meaningful dialogue in classrooms around issues of current concern. Saunders focuses on use of collections from the contentious periods of Reconstruction, post-Reconstruction, and the Civil Rights Era. The materials serve as springboards to understanding students' issues in this post-truth era.

The Information Literacy Classroom: Uneasy Questions, Creative Responses

While many of the chapters in other sections engage with the challenges and opportunities of information literacy education at this sociopolitical moment, this section, "The Information Literacy Classroom: Uneasy Questions, Creative Responses," foregrounds how one of the most obvious places for dialogue in academic contexts may be the information literacy classroom. This section's authors illustrate the significance and weight of information literacy education at a time of intense epistemological questions and collective anxieties.

Sara Miller, Gabe Ording, Eric Tans, and Claudia Vergara open the section with an expansive discussion on teaching information and scientific literacy at a time when questioning the value of scientific evidence, methods, and knowledge has become more commonplace and more socially accepted. In "'The Earth Is Flat' and Other Thresholds: A Critically Reflective Cross-disciplinary Conversation in the Post-truth Era" (chapter 12), they describe how they used the ACRL *Framework for Information Literacy* in focus groups and interviews with fellow educators as a catalyst for productive conversations on the complexities of teaching

information and scientific literacy. Group participants respond to a range of difficult questions, including how educators can constructively challenge "flat-earth" arguments and absolute relativistic thinking that tend to be deeply rooted in students' worldviews and senses of self and social belonging. At the same time that the authors consider the discomfort of such teaching, they also bring creativity and compassion to articulating pedagogical approaches that have been beneficial in their classrooms. The cross-disciplinary nature of these conversations reflects information literacy education as a collaborative effort that is greatly strengthened through open, critical, and ongoing dialogue.

Sebastian Krutkowski similarly considers how the presence of misleading and false information, particularly that found in online environments, has implications for information literacy education. In "The John Oliver Effect: Using Political Satire to Encourage Critical Thinking Skills in Information Literacy Instruction" (chapter 13), Krutkowski discusses his use of humorous political satire videos in order to help students critically engage with and reflect on social issues. Within the context of satire, students are able to more flexibly engage with ideas, as humor offers an entry point for further exploring and understanding a topic. Approaching humor as a catalyst for student reflection, positive emotional responses, and synthesis and evaluation of sources, Krutkowski provides teaching ideas for and examples of incorporating humor into library instruction.

Like Krutkowski, Mark Lenker explores the affective dimensions of information literacy and information behaviors. In "Indignation in Political Discourse: Thoughts toward an Information Literacy Curriculum" (chapter 14), Lenker discusses how fiery political rhetoric and discourse often stand in the way of critical thought and meaningful dialogue. As he considers both the potential dangers and the potential usefulness that indignation plays in thinking, Lenker explores how information literacy education can counteract the negative effects of indignant discourse. He concludes that an understanding of the role that anger often plays in cognition and information behaviors can help individuals become curious about their own experiences of indignation and more critical in their evaluation of information that expresses or elicits anger in themselves or in others. Drawing on philosopher Robert Solomon's conception of emotions as ways of engaging and interacting with the world, as well as on research from psychology, political science, and media studies, Lenker invites readers to consider the challenges of engaging with heated political and public discourse and offers practical suggestions and resources for information literacy instruction.

As Lenker's work suggests, while people are often able to think more critically and reflectively through a consideration of differing viewpoints, this does not mean that all sides of an issue are equal or that it is always desirable to be neutral about ethical, social, or political issues. Often when one experiences indignation, it is a response to injustice that should be challenged. In "No Such Thing as Neutral: Rethinking Undergraduate Instruction and Outreach in a Time of 'Post-

truth'" (chapter 15), Holly Luetkenhaus, Cristina Colquhoun, and Matt Upson illustrate the importance of standing against injustice and encouraging students to engage in and develop critical consciousness. The authors challenge the notion of library neutrality and share how critical pedagogy and critical information literacy have informed their instructional practices in first-year seminars, first-year writing, and an information literacy credit course. They acknowledge the messiness and unease that sometimes arise in critical classrooms and reflect on how such experiences continue to deepen their pedagogical practices.

In the book's last chapter, "Open Educational Practices and Reflective Dialogue: The Role of the *Framework for Information Literacy*" (chapter 16), Craig Gibson and Trudi Jacobson look more holistically at library instruction—both during and outside of times of political polarization. They discuss closed practices in education (such as uniform curricula, learning analytics, and standard measures of student success) and posit that reframing instruction around open educational practices—which encourage social learning, fostering communities of practices, and spaces for sharing ideas—provides opportunities for increased student engagement and substantive dialogue. These practices have implications not only for teaching, but also for other areas of librarianship and academia. Working with the ACRL *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*, the authors share ways that open educational practices are embedded in each of the document's pedagogical frames. They also provide an example assignment that illustrates the possibilities for incorporating student sharing and student agency in coursework. Gibson and Jacobson's work shines a light on the possibility of open educational practices as a critical element in encouraging student engagement and reflective dialogue throughout campus learning environments, both now and in the future.

Final Note

While this book has been written in a particular time and context, the authors repeatedly illustrate that social and ideological differences have always been critical to library, archival, and information work and will remain so. We hope that this publication is a catalyst and a resource for the kind of reflective and constructive dialogue that we have described here. We also hope the book is a prompt for asking hard and sometimes uncomfortable questions about what reflective dialogue is, what forms it might take and in what contexts, who it does or does not include, and what its possibilities and limitations are.

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