

# The Political Librarian

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## Editorial Note: Advocacy Defines the Future

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## Dustin Fife

Libraries have entered financially perilous times as the merits of public services, once described as “common goods,” are under attack. Institutions that have been unassailable for over a century are being undercut nationally and locally. Public schools are being stretched financially by for-profit charters, prisons are being privatized, and libraries and museums are being asked to quantify the unquantifiable. Asking questions is a good thing, and services can be justified through both quantitative and qualitative research, and should be. Questions about the inequitable distribution and implementation of public services are essential. But what do we do when the idea of a “common good” existing at all is under attack? How do libraries, as one indispensable aspect of the public square, help protect the entire public square?

The answer is politics and policies. It is well past time that we all learned to be policy advocates to preserve (and build) transformative democratic services. We must fundamentally understand where and how we should expend our valuable resources in the quagmire of politics and policy. This issue of *The Political Librarian* focuses directly on what it means to be an advocate and how understanding the evolving political environment and funding paradigms influences how we should be advocating.

This issue begins with TJ Bliss, a long time Open Educational Resources (OER) advocate and the current Director of Development and Strategy at Wiki Education. He has spent the best part of a decade fighting for OER policies at the local, state, and national level. Bliss dispenses wisdom as an advocate that has persisted across all types of government. After Bliss, both James LaRue, Director of the Office for Intellectual Freedom, and John Chrastka, Executive Director of EveryLibrary, explain why support for “common goods” is not as common anymore. LaRue lays out best practices for advocates and invites you all to the ALA Advocacy Bootcamp, an incredible resource for taking your advocacy to the next level. Chrastka explains how libraries must diversify and adapt to new taxing models as policies from the Progressive Era and Great Society period are replaced with new models that describe social services as “entitlements” and, as James LaRue also points out, refers to taxes as “burdens.” Michelle Boisvenue-Fox, the Direc-

tor of Innovation and User Experience for Kent District Library, Michigan, joins the political fray by examining how openness, empathy, and reaching across political aisles creates opportunities for libraries to find unexpected champions.

Our final two pieces philosophically challenge the idea of neutrality and search for the role of libraries in a democratic society, respectively. T.J. Lamanna shows that libraries hurt themselves and the most vulnerable members of our society when we cling to a false narrative of neutrality. Not choosing a side, is choosing a side, and Lamanna passionately explains why, “Libraries have never been neutral, and never truly can be.” Last, but not least, John Buschman, Dean of University Libraries at Seton Hall University and author of *Dismantling the Public Sphere: Situating and Sustaining Libraries in the Age of the New Public Philosophy* (2003) and *Libraries, Classrooms and the Interests of Democracy: Marking the Limits of Neoliberalism* (2012), intellectually and philosophically searches for the role of libraries in our modern society. Buschman goes beyond the normal narratives of librarianship to place libraries among the writings of several different fields in order to articulate a vision of what libraries already do and how they are intertwined with a healthy community and society.

It is often said that without a librarian, a library is not a library. It has also been said that without a library, a community is not a community. These statements may be debatable, but without a belief in “common goods” what we have understood society and the public square to be, might altogether cease to exist. All of these articles implore each of us to wake up and do more than retweet ideas, policies, and services that we believe in. We must be policy advocates and build a better and brighter public square.

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Dustin Fife is the Series Editor of *The Political Librarian* and the Director of Library Services for Western State Colorado University. If you have ideas for *The Political Librarian* or would like to submit a piece, please do not hesitate to contact him at [dustin.fife@everylibrary.org](mailto:dustin.fife@everylibrary.org).