

Op Ed — Ivory Tower vs. the Dark Side: A Rebuttal to “Joining the Dark Side”

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The April, 2012, issue of *Against the Grain* included an article by **Laura Harris**, “Joining the Dark Side,”¹ which I read with interest. **Harris** described her transition from working in an academic library to working for **Springshare**, the developer and vendor for the wonderful LibGuides. The article held interest for me personally, since I experienced a similar change earlier in my career. I had spent seven years in academic libraries when I received an unexpected and unsolicited job offer from **EBSCO Subscription Services** (later **EBSCO Information Services**). Like **Laura**, I had not considered working for a vendor. Well, that’s not quite true. I had actually talked with a couple of folks at **EBSCO** before, but only for a possible position at their headquarters in Birmingham, AL. I thought I was completely uninterested in any sort of customer-facing position. And yet, that is what I ended up doing (in three different positions) for fifteen years!

During the first year of my tenure with **EBSCO** I was talking with a colleague at a reception, and I started a sentence with, “When I was a librarian...” Seconds later, **Lynn Fortney**, director of **EBSCO’s** Biomedical Division, turned away from her own conversation to interrupt me with, “You are *still* a librarian! You just work in many libraries now, instead of one.” And that is the ethos that I shared with the many other librarians at **EBSCO**. We were librarians who happened to be working for a vendor. But during my years at **EBSCO**, I came to have great respect not only for many of my non-librarian colleagues, but also some of our competitors and the publishers with whom we collaborated. And of course, not all of those other vendor-types were librarians. What I respected about those other folks was their integrity; their knowledge not only of their businesses but also of the libraries (and, by extension, the library users) they served; and their sincere concern that they and their companies provide a good service or product for their customers.

For years, I have attended conferences with programs about the “vendor-librarian” relationship. In fact, I was still a baby librarian when I attended my first **Charleston Conference** back in 1988, and while listening to someone drone on about a particular publisher, I wondered, “But why is this

publisher being criticized for making money? Isn’t that the point of a business in a free market? Should we expect to get that publisher’s journals at cost?” I was, most definitely, naïve and idealistic. Certainly I have since come across publishers with whom I wish I could refuse to do business. Another early lesson I learned at **EBSCO** was the Golden Rule: He who has the gold rules. Some publishers have content that we simply cannot *not* buy.

But I digress. My real point is this: Why on earth, after so much discussion of the vendor-librarian relationship and talk about how we can work as partners and we should collaborate to meet the needs of our end users, do we still refer to vendors and publishers as “The Dark Side?” In my opinion, this only perpetuates the belief that vendors and publishers are inherently untrustworthy, perhaps even evil.

I know that upon reading this, many people will think, “This woman needs to get a sense of humor.” And indeed, the title of this column was proposed as a tongue in cheek suggestion. It turns out that I feel too passionately about this to make an attempt at humor, because language matters. In ways that our conscious minds sometimes aren’t aware of, language affects and influences the way we think and feel about others. In the seminal *The Handbook of Nonsexist Writing*, **Miller** and **Swift** give examples of ways that sexist, or non-gender-neutral, writing can affect the ways that little girls see the world.

Non-gender-neutral language can put limits on what little girls can imagine for themselves and their futures. In the United States, many institutions — including schools, colleges, universities, and local and state governments — have placed bans on “hate speech,” which is usually recognized as any communication that maligns a person (or people) based on his or her gender, sexual orientation, race or other identifiers. It is becoming more generally recognized that hate speech can lead to hate *acts*.

Now, I’m not suggesting that after engaging in disparaging talk about vendors, even in jest, some librarians may escalate to keying cars, or putting nasty signs in a vendor’s office, or violating their civil rights. But talking about vendors in a negative way, *even in jest*, could lead people not to trust them fully, or not treat them fairly in a business negotiation. So I ask you to consider removing that tired, not really so funny phrase — referring to vendors as “the dark side” — from your vocabularies. In the end, it really affects us all. 🌱

Endnote

1. I later learned that it was not **Laura Harris’** intention to title the column “Joining the Dark Side,” and that there was a miscommunication somewhere in the editing process.

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