

Michael J. Hughes. The Impact of Ideology on Library Practice: A Case Study of Three Radical Librarians. A Master's Paper for the M.S. in L.S. degree. March 2012. 93 pages. Advisor: Jeffrey Pomerantz

The purpose of this study is to better understand the motivations that bring anarchists to librarianship and the different ways their political convictions impact library practice and work-life, including the extent to which the job accommodates or compromises radical politics. Three radical librarians were interviewed according to a semi-structured question schedule. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed using Stake's cross-case protocol, which yields themes common to all cases by comparing them against each other for commonalities, divergences, and patterns in participant responses. Results showed that all three participants were drawn to librarianship due to its strong service orientation and consonance with their activist work. Difficulties included the tensions inherent in managing others and participating within large group structures that impede direct action. This study draws attention to the shortfall of research on the praxis of this unique population within the profession and recommends directions for future investigation.

Headings:

Library science – Political aspects – United States.

Librarians – Professional ethics – United States.

Radicalism – United States.

THE IMPACT OF IDEOLOGY ON LIBRARY PRACTICE:
A CASE STUDY OF THREE RADICAL LIBRARIANS

by
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Introduction

Anarchism and anarchy are “undoubtedly the most misrepresented ideas in political theory” (McKay, 2008), and anarchism's very nature – inclusive, self-critical, ever-evolving – makes the formation of splinter groups and sub-schools inevitable, giving way to a litany of adjectival qualifiers that explain and nuance varieties of anarchist practice, making it somewhat difficult to crystallize the philosophy in a single, uniform definition. It is perhaps easier, and useful, to describe what anarchism is not. It is not nihilism. It is not unthinking violence. It is not chaos and disorder.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines anarchism as “belief in the abolition of all government and the organization of society on a voluntary, cooperative basis without recourse to force or compulsion” (Anarchism, n.d.). This definition is extended by *The Anarchist FAQ*, which describes anarchism as “a political theory which aims to create a society within which individuals freely cooperate together as equals” (McKay, 2008). Cindy Milstein expands on both definitions in an essay that “[offers] an introduction to anarchism from the vantage point of the early twenty-first century” (Milstein, 2010). Her writing on the subject is worth quoting at length:

“Anarchism is a synthesis of the best of liberalism and the best of communism, elevated and transformed by the best of libertarian Left traditions that work toward an egalitarian, voluntarily [sic], and nonhierarchical society. The project of liberalism in the broadest sense is to ensure personal liberty. Communism's overarching project is to ensure the communal good...Anarchism's great leap was to combine self and society in one political vision; at the same time, it jettisoned the state and property as the pillars of support, relying instead on self-organization and mutual aid” (Milstein, 2010).

There are as many definitions of anarchism as there are anarchistic schools of thought¹, but the commonalities that bind them together under an overarching political theory are an unwavering belief in personal liberty and autonomy, recognition of the right to free and voluntary association, and the rejection of illegitimate authority and domination. Illegitimate in this context refers to centralized power that institutions – governmental, industrial, or religious – can wield in ways that negatively impact individual lives and cultures; the U.S. government’s discretionary wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, for example. Noam Chomsky, a world-famous linguist and noted anarchist, explains that power “is always illegitimate unless it proves itself to be legitimate. So the burden of proof is always on those who claim that some authoritarian, hierarchic relation is legitimate. If they can’t prove it, it should be dismantled” (Kreiser, 2002).

This last point on illegitimate authority is difficult to reconcile with political reality in the United States, where the mechanics of representative democracy and constitutional authority are taught in civics classes across the nation. Should we, then, be surprised that misconceptions about anarchism persist? The cartoon characterization of the “bomb-throwing anarchist,” a stale holdover from the bloody Haymarket Affair of 1886, in which four Chicago anarchists were hanged, haunts contemporary reportage and discussions of the theory and its adherents (see, for example, Hedges, 2012). Or else anarchism is co-opted and sold as a lifestyle accessory, or dismissed out of hand as a utopian daydream of the lunatic fringe. Two library-related examples amply demonstrate these tendencies. The first is a t-shirt, designed by artist Christopher Baldwin and emblazoned with the word “Libr[Ⓐ]rian.” Its tongue-in-cheek item description plays on the stereotype of librarian fastidiousness and reads in part, “May book befoulers be kept

looking over their shoulders. Every time they go to underline, highlight, dog-ear, or let a young child handle a book shortly after eating something with jelly, may they remember that some librarians don't believe in law” (Baldwin, n.d.). Here, the radical librarian is reduced to both punch line and product, and no suggestion is proffered to indicate that such an individual exists anywhere in society.

The second example is supplied by the Annoyed Librarian, an anonymous provocateur and columnist for *Library Journal*. Before her tenure with that publication, she authored a blog post on unnamed anarchist librarians and their position relative to internet filtering in public libraries, writing acidly that “It's hard not to chuckle, or perhaps even guffaw, at the phrase 'anarchist librarian,' considering that the very profession of librarianship usually depends on having governments, taxes, boards, etc.” In the same post, anarchists are described as “smelly hippy person[s]” who fail to comprehend that “[the world] isn't just all 'information.' And none of it's free...The taxman *takes* people's money and forces them to pay for the 'information.' I thought anarchists didn't like the taxman...'Anarchists,' like all their hippie friends, *love* government when it can be used against someone else” (Annoyed Librarian, 2006).

In addition to demonstrating her ignorance of anarchism, the Annoyed Librarian offers a perfect example of the misrepresentation discussed above. More importantly, she expresses a disbelief that is central to the seemingly oxymoronic conjunction of “anarchist” and “librarian.” Hers is a fair question, however unfairly posed: how does the anti-authoritarian conform to the hierarchical organization and structure of libraries, with their directors, administrators, and middle managers? Is this an example of Orwellian doublespeak, pragmatic compromise, or is something else at work here?

It is impossible to know with certainty the number of librarians who identify as anarchists or tend toward that position in their political orientation, but that they exist is beyond dispute. They are numerous enough to enjoy a bona fide subculture within the profession, including an active email listserv², websites and blogs devoted to their activities, a presence in the scholarly literature, and well-known Radical Reference collectives that put quality information, verified by professional librarians, in the hands of activists and independent journalists at no cost. Some librarians are “out” as anarchists or sympathizers, including the rural community technologist, Jessamyn West, and Chuck Munson, the proprietor of infoshop.org, a longstanding and comprehensive collection of resources on anarchism. But despite, or perhaps in spite of this visibility, there is little research examining the praxis of this unique population within the profession.

In her history of progressive librarianship, also known as socially responsible, radical, and critical librarianship, Samek (2004) writes, “Despite a progressive library movement that has been building for decades, scant scholarship has been produced on the subject.” What little exists tends to appear in alternative press journals, such as the aptly named *Progressive Librarian*, and in occasional articles and interviews for popular trade magazines, e.g., *Library Journal* and *American Libraries*. Refereed research informed by empirical data is, to date, an overlooked area of inquiry. If scholarship on a parent category, progressive librarianship, is lacking, it follows that even less can be found concerning librarian practitioners of left-libertarian politics. This study is an attempt to correct this imbalance by soliciting the conceptions, ideas, and opinions of radical librarians in extensive interviews that, taken together, begin to uncover the motivations that bring them to librarianship and investigate the effects of activism on their library

work-life, including the political and ethical compromises brokered by the realities of the workplace. A review of the literature generated *a priori* research questions, including:

- What are the commonalities of practice that make librarianship an attractive career choice for anarchists?
- What compromises and concessions does the anti-authoritarian librarian make when working inside hierarchical institutions of unequal power distribution?
- To what extent does one practice support and inform the other, or are work-life and activism kept separate from one another?
- Is the job simply a means to an end, a less noxious alternative to working in the private sector, or is it an extension of the anarchist's desire to achieve social change through direct action, to live one's beliefs?
- In what is widely understood to be a liberal profession (Morrone & Friedman, 2009), are political and social justice factors, of fundamental importance to anarchists, widely present in aspirants' decisions to pursue librarianship?

This study will attempt to answer these and emergent questions through the lived experiences and personal opinions of radical librarians. Their testimony was captured in semi-structured interviews, transcribed, and compared against the cases of others like them in an attempt to discern the commonalities and divergences within this practice. A more complete picture of radical librarianship in all its complexity emerges in the final analysis.

Many studies have plumbed the motivations for taking up librarianship or for gravitating toward certain specializations within the profession. But the career motivations, activist energies, and workplace compromises of the anarchists and left-

radicals behind the reference desk have gone overlooked. In point of fact, it is fair to say that many librarians would be surprised to discover that such a person exists at all. After all, librarians are for organization, classification, and making order from chaos. How can one uphold such values yet seem to contradict them at the same time? This study will provide an answer to this and related questions.

A Brief Note on Bias

In a study of this kind, the question of bias must be acknowledged. The researcher, while not an anarchist, does not claim to be a disinterested observer. He holds views that some might describe as radical and generally sympathizes with anarchist principles and ideals, including mutual aid, consensual decision-making, agitating for flatter power structures, and alternative economic systems that favor human needs over capital. This political orientation informed the researcher's own motivation to pursue a career in libraries and will likely play an important role in his work, professional or otherwise, in years to come.

Literature Review

Samek's history and value explication of the global progressive movement in librarianship illuminates the larger context in which anarchist information practice occurs. The movement "[represents] a range of viewpoints on a continuum that spans from an anarchist stance to varying degrees of a social responsibility perspective" (Samek, 2004). Through historical research, she explores its conceptual framework, defining characteristics, intent, primary participants, and vehicles for discourse. She also questions the impact of progressivism on the profession and society as a whole. Her

intention is to recover the “lost” history of founding members, such as John Cotton Dana and Thomas Doessing, and to promote interest in and encourage research on social responsibilities in the profession, including such topics as the diversity of political opinion and “moral understanding” within LIS; the importance of history and historical values in the profession’s development; the identity of progressive librarianship; and to “identify the origin, development, and influence of progressive library ideas and concepts” (Samek, 2004).

She concludes that progressive librarianship is not a new movement but one grounded in the foundational practices of intellectual freedom and anti-censorship. The democratizing power of the internet extends participation in this movement by creating new spaces, not limited by temporal or geographic boundaries, in which to organize, share ideas, build consensus and community, and recruit new participants. Samek is interested in the profession’s progressive politics generally, not its radical positions exclusively, but the article is informative nonetheless because it examines the ethical and social justice concerns that underpin anarchist involvement while demonstrating the importance of the internet in enabling fractured, marginalized groups to cohere around virtual spaces. Though it describes the characteristics that progressive librarians share (e.g., rejection of librarian “neutrality” and prioritizing human needs over capital) and emphasizes gains, such as the successful effort to add social responsibility to ALA’s *Core Values Task Force II Report*, Samek’s article does not explore with any depth the anarchist voices within the movement or their unique aims and ideals.

Anarchist views are well represented, however, by Chuck Munson’s “What do radical librarians do?”, a chapter in the LIS anthology *Radical Librarians Redux*. The

essay is a personal interpretation and experience of radical librarianship by a self-identified anarchist. In answering the titular question, Munson enumerates the many activities that separate the radical informationist from his or her conventional peers, including protest attendance, staffing ad hoc reference desks at protests and convergences, criticizing illegitimate systems of power in libraries, and resisting privatization and corporatization within the profession. The anarchist librarian typically balances volunteer and activist work with professional demands since “freedom of speech ends when one walks through the office door” (Munson, 2003). Typically, the radical librarian comes to politics first, then to library school, recognizing that librarianship has a long history of support for progressive ideals such as freedom of speech and intellectual freedom (Samek, 2004).

According to Munson, compensation is less important to progressives and radicals than working in a profession that matches their beliefs and values (Munson, 2003). Most tend to work in traditional library settings, such as academic libraries; a handful of radical workplaces exist, however, such as the Labadie Collection, an archive of radical political ephemera located at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor.

Like Samek, Munson discusses the centrality of the internet to much of the radical’s work. It allows for networking among geographically diverse colleagues (especially helpful for radicals in provincial and rural communities) and extends library service by enabling virtual reference service through email, web forums, and other e-communications.

Munson cites the work and words of others in this essay, but it is not a work of scholarly research and contains mostly unsupported personal feelings or opinions limited

to the author's experiences. Although he provides an overview of anarchist motivations for library practice and discusses the intersections of personal politics and library work, his conclusions are not backed by empirical data and, therefore, are not generalizable.

An article by Morrone and Friedman, however, goes a long way toward correcting this imbalance. The authors are founding members of Radical Reference, "a collective of progressive library workers and students who use virtual and face-to-face reference services" to meet the information needs of activists and independent journalists (Morrone & Friedman, 2009). Their article begins to bridge a gap in the literature on the many collaborations between activists and librarians. Like Samek's progressive librarians, Radical Reference (RR) members eschew neutral practice, recognizing that information access is always political. Furthermore, RR "considers the librarian as citizen as well as...professional" and "employs community coalitions and alliances between progressive librarians and with other like-minded groups" (Samek, 2004). For example, a Radical Reference member might join the organization in order to live the values she cannot synthesize into her paid professional work.

The article situates RR within the larger context of socially responsible librarianship. An extensive middle passage recapitulates the group's history, major concerns, and efforts, including outreach to underserved communities and support for alternative presses, such as authoring alternative library literature to highlight progressive concerns (e.g. *Library Juice*, *Sipapu*, and *Synergy*). This thorough and well-researched account is organized by conceptual headings such as "Evolving Reference Services", "Response to RR from Activist Community Partners and Users", and "Radical Reference in Context: Socially Responsible Librarianship". It adds a scholarly dimension to the

career motivations summarized in Munson's article by supporting contentions with historical research. A section tracing the development of social responsibility within the American Library Association is particularly detailed.

Unfortunately, most of the literature exploring anarchism within the profession is geared toward a general readership. A 2007 *Serials Review* column by Jessamyn West, for instance, presents an interview with three librarians from the Kate Sharpley Library, "a library, reference service, and publishing association that provides access to information about anarchism and anarchist history" (West, 2007). Though interesting, it is short in length, light on detail, and does not explore the personal background or career motivations of its subjects.

An introduction to the topic by Finnell and Marcantel is even more general. It defines anarchism for the reader and briefly describes the different divisions of thought within the theory, including anarcho-communism, anarcho-capitalism, and so forth. It also notes that anarchism's emphasis on liberation has attracted historically oppressed peoples to it, resulting in engagement by people of color, women, and LGBTQ individuals. Most of the article is devoted to a discussion of the various collections of anarchist material in archives and special libraries, many of which are independent or unaffiliated due to anarchist mistrust of institutional authority. Those maintained by universities and funded groups tend toward typical library practices, such as the use of cataloging standards and a tendency to focus on specific figures and historical movements, whereas independent archives emphasize compilations of materials and their relevance to ongoing social struggles.

In the end, this article is essentially a pathfinder for the curious. As a primer, it is excellent. As research fodder, it is typical of the scarcity of information available on the subject of anarchist practice in the library profession.

Vastly more research exists on why people choose librarianship as a profession and on related subjects, i.e., why they leave other jobs for it or why they leave it altogether. At just four articles, this section is hardly comprehensive, but it does showcase some of the recurrent themes of studies conducted in different institutions, at different times. At this stage in my research it is not clear that political factors play a significant role in influencing the decision to take up LIS, largely because researchers investigating career motivations do not gather this data. The examination of sociopolitical factors as a primary driver is an area that merits future research.

Dewey (1985) presents the results of a three-year study in which incoming library school students at Indiana University were asked about their career motivations using a questionnaire survey method in which data were analyzed by simple frequencies and percentages. The author discovered that students were most often influenced by contact with librarians. “Past research,” she wrote, “has indicated that students are primarily influenced to pursue a career in librarianship by librarians themselves,” and her study reaffirms those results (Dewey, 1985).

Despite a title that promises an investigation of how librarianship is selected as a career, however, this study does not examine individual motivations. Rather, it asks students how they learned of Indiana University specifically and goes on to question why they chose that school over others (geographic location and strong school reputation, primarily). Its findings are significant for the University’s LIS program and for would-be

librarian recruiters generally, but not for anyone seeking to understand the various factors that drive an individual's decision-making process with regard to career choice.

Furthermore, its results are not statistically significant; they are limited to a small number of respondents, responding to closed questions, at a single school. The personal, political, and other psychosocial factors influencing librarianship as a career are not investigated.

Bello's 1996 study incorporates Dewey's work but aims to better understand the factors that influence a person's decision to become a librarian. He finds that librarianship is not often a first career choice but one influenced by third-party suggestion, the role of life experience, or a simple attrition of other job options. Given this early- and mid-career tendency to "switch gears", the author seeks to understand the external, professional, and extrinsic factors that initially motivated his subjects to become librarians. These factors consist of previous library experience; exposure to library publicity; the influence of individuals, usually librarians; the desire to work with like-minded colleagues; professional factors, such as salary and job security; and crucially, self-expressed factors, such as the opportunity to work with people and help the less fortunate. This last consideration is much closer to the political factors or social service possibilities that Samek, Munson, Morrone, and Friedman cite as the radical's motivation for practicing librarianship.

Bello's hypotheses, one for each factor category (external, professional, or extrinsic), are tested for validity using a chi-square formula. The first two are accepted as statistically significant, i.e., external and professional motivations play a pronounced role in choosing librarianship. The third hypothesis resulted in computed values "almost the same as the table value" and, thus, was not accepted or rejected (Bello, 1996). Despite the

author's identification of service or "helping" values in previous studies, notably Moen and Heim's 1988 article for *American Libraries*, his own results are inconclusive with regard to the would-be librarian's political motivations.

Ard et al., like Bello, seek to answer the question "why library and information science," but for a very different reason. Writing in 2005-6, the authors seek to elicit the career motivations and beliefs of University of Alabama School of Library and Information Studies (SLIS) students in order to craft more effective recruitment strategies. Their study was situated in the midst of a predicted librarian shortage and driven by a need to replace retiring professionals with diverse and qualified candidates. Accordingly, researchers gathered information on the variables that affected SLIS students' decisions to pursue a job in libraries.

Major findings from the 96 completed questionnaires included the discovery that a majority of students (89 percent) decided to pursue LIS studies during or after college, with a full 31 percent not considering an LIS career until five or more years after graduation. Only 3 percent listed librarianship as a lifetime ambition. Questions about compensation revealed that pay is not a strong motivation for entering the profession; only 24 percent of students listed salary as a major influence, lending evidence to Munson's assertion that pay is not a determining factor in job uptake among radical librarians and that most come to the profession later in life. Critically, "job factors," interpreted to mean anything related to the work responsibilities of librarians, are identified by a majority of respondents (40 percent) as the chief motivation behind their decision to enroll in library school. In other words, "The promise of an interesting job

draws far more people into librarianship than compensation, clientele, or prestige” (Ard et al., 2006).

Regrettably, this study has dated considerably since it was published, due largely to the economic recession of 2007-11 and the resulting rounds of layoffs, closures, and a permanent shrinkage in job availability. But outdated findings are not the only concern. The authors’ survey instrument (and therefore their conclusions) is of limited use in answering my research questions. The use of mostly closed questions eliminates an entire range of possible responses by immediately narrowing a respondent’s choices. The presence of a write-in option, while laudable, is insufficient; a list of pre-defined responses is likely to color respondents’ answers. Furthermore, the lumping of important psychosocial factors that accompany decision-making processes into a single category, “job factors,” is also disappointing, given that it conflates a person’s political actuation or service orientation with more mundane, generic factors, such as individual job responsibilities.

In 2010, graduate students at the University of Alabama followed up on Ard’s findings in order to account for the rapid change that occurred since the earlier study was published. The primary reason for the update, which comes just six years after the Ard article, is the supposition that an economic recession and the resulting job woes will have impacted the desire to take up librarianship. The “tide of technological change,” the development of new avenues for information work, and the availability of distance education options at Alabama and other LIS schools are also cited as reasons for updating the previous study (Taylor, Perry, Barton, & Spencer, 2010). Researchers used the same instrument as before to gather data, supplemented by new questions centering on the

aforementioned changes to the LIS profession. As a result, the study's findings are quite similar to its forbear. Job outlook remains virtually unchanged among new students, with just 6 percent describing the market as poor. Career motivations, including "job functions," remain a top contender, with 76 percent of respondents identifying this option as key to their decision to pursue the MLIS. These functions are presented in the aggregate as before, making it difficult to understand the personal, emotional, and intellectual reasons that confirmed librarianship as a good career choice for each respondent. It is only in a final section on recommendations for recruitment that librarians' ideals are discussed, mostly as counterweight to prevailing stereotypes of the profession. "Librarians hold, at least professionally, progressive ideals: librarians are anticensorship, firm believers in an individual's right to privacy, and staunchly opposed to any force that seeks to violate those rights (most recently the USA Patriot Act)" (Taylor et al., 2010).

The value of this literature review lies mainly in demonstrating the paucity of research on radicals within librarianship's ranks and the failure of past researchers to consider a librarian's politics when examining his or her motivations for entering the profession.

Methodology

This study follows the protocol of Stake's multiple case study analysis. It begins with a quintain, defined as a collection of cases with similar conditions or characteristics. The researcher studies these cases "in terms of their own situational issues, interprets patterns within each case, and then analyzes cross-case findings to make assertions about

the binding” (Stake, 2006). The quintain in this study is the motivation that brings radical librarians to the profession and the tension or accommodation that accompanies the merger of individual and institutional politics.

Given the difficulty of meeting face-to-face with geographically diverse participants, interviews were conducted over Skype, a Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) service, and recorded in MP3 format using Call Recorder, a program extension. Recording the interviews allowed for later transcription and captured paralinguistic features – phrasing, verbal emphases, pauses – that sometimes prove meaningful in later analysis (Jovchelovitch and Bauer, 2000). For example, repetitive use of filler words, such as ‘like,’ ‘sort of,’ and ‘kind of,’ may indicate that a respondent is taking the time to critically engage a question rather than answering it hastily. Laughter may undermine the seriousness of a given statement and a tongue click (‘tsk’) or sigh may indicate frustration or confusion. These sounds have real value in correctly interpreting the meaning of a participant’s answers.

Sampling

Cases were identified through a combination of convenience and snowball sampling. The researcher had already secured an interview with one anarchist librarian, having made her acquaintance at a student-sponsored lecture in 2011. This participant has deep ties to the librarian community, radical or otherwise, so her help was sought in identifying and making an introduction to interested subjects. This obviated probability sampling but greatly increased the researcher’s ability to locate willing participants (Wildemuth, 2009), especially considering the hostility that sometimes meets public

expressions of anarchist thought and practice.

Based on this initial list of suggestions, a letter of introduction and a study consent form, both approved by UNC's Institutional Review Board (IRB), were emailed to prospective participants. Two additional librarians gave their consent to be interviewed out of seven solicited by the researcher.

Data Collection

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews conducted over Skype. Flexibility in the interview structure enabled the researcher to switch questions in or out depending on the direction of an interview, and to adapt in real time to a conversation's particular course. This also allowed for the organic generation of new and unanticipated questions in response to interesting or unexpected responses from participants; that followed up on a participant's response; or that solicited greater detail on a mentioned phenomenon. During each conversation, the researcher took copious notes on interesting or potentially important statements in order to extract greater meaning from them during data analysis.

Data Analysis

This study employs a cross-case analysis in order to discover the complexity of the quintain as revealed by the commonalities and differences that occur across individual manifestations (Stake, 2006). The results of each interview are reported according to the questions in the interview schedule, revealing each participant's unique perspective on the issues particular to her situation. Each case is summarized in this fashion, allowing

themes – critical differences and similarities – to emerge when compared against the other cases in the quintain. Repeated words and phrases, key ideas that surfaced across all three conversations – these formed a basis for coding, which the researcher did by hand. Keywords were physically underlined and concepts were extracted and written in the margins of the paper, creating a breadcrumb trail that traced the emerging shape of the researcher’s thoughts, a trail pointed at the findings of the study. These findings comprise the evidence that justifies assertions made by the researcher in a concluding paragraph, i.e., preliminary answers to the research questions driving the study.

These assertions, especially when taken with the limitations enumerated below, are not assumed to be irrefutable. As Stake reminds us, “social scientists know that social and educational research findings carry opinion and authenticated findings together in a package” (Stake, 2006).

Limitations

Ideally this study would involve more participants, perhaps as many as ten, in order to verify theme commonality and to obtain greater ‘groundedness’, or the rooting of interpretations in the actual responses of participants. Because this study was completed in fewer than three months, however, its findings are of limited generalization. The greatest value of the study is in the door it opens for investigators with more time and resources than presently available to the researcher.

The interviews, which normally would be conducted in person, must be done at a distance given the economic and temporal impossibility of meeting participants where they live. While VoIP interviews present some advantages over their face-to-face

counterparts (e.g., control over the line of questioning), they allow for a greater degree of indirect information “filtered through the views of interviewees” and “[provide] information in a designated place rather than in the natural field setting” (Creswell, 2009).

Coding for themes, too, requires a great deal of scrutiny in order to ensure that codes are consistently and correctly applied in order to prevent drift in their meaning. Although the researcher took pains to ensure accuracy while coding transcripts, first by transcribing the interviews, which offers one level of sensitization to the data, then by reading through each transcript multiple times, it is not assumed that the researcher is infallible. Had more time been available, a second coder would have performed a separate audit of the data, the results of which would be scrutinized against the researcher’s codes. The product of this synthesis, when applied to the interview data, would increase the chance that different people reading the same statement would reach the same conclusion about its meaning (Tinsley & Weiss, 1975). As it stands, the conclusions in this study are the researcher’s own.

Results

Career History

The first participant, whom I will call Pinky Rose³, has worked in libraries in one capacity or another since 1994, including public, academic, and special libraries. Most of her work, expertise, and professional interests concern small public libraries, however.

A second volunteer, Millie Lammoreaux, has worked as a librarian for ten years, exclusively in academic libraries and primarily in reference services.

The study's third and final participant, Willie Hart, is comparatively new to the profession, having just entered her second year as a degreed professional in an academic library. She worked as a paraprofessional in special and academic libraries for three years before earning her MLS.

Career Motivation

When asked why she decided to become a librarian, Pinky explained that the profession presented an opportunity to make a living while continuing her activist commitments. "One of the things that was kind of exciting to me that I hadn't really known about the profession was that I could do the activist stuff that I'd always done since high school...and that I could actually professionally be sort of activist," she said. "And so things like children's right to read, and the First Amendment, and anti-censorship, and all that kind of stuff I felt dovetailed super nicely with what I perceived to be the values of the profession." She hastened to add that "you [don't] have to be an anarchist to be interested in librarianship or even good at librarianship, but that I found other people who, even outside of their job, were sort of lifestyle-y interested in the same

sorts of things that I was.” Librarianship also allowed Pinky to engage in the kinds of activities that underpin anarchist ideals (e.g., direct action and mutual aid) without “having to be in like eight million freaking committee meetings talking about them, which is one of the things that I think anybody who’s spent a lot of time in anarchist circles often gets really freaking sick of. Sometimes it’s nice to have your self-identified community be small so you can just go out and be awesome for the public library and set up programming and give stuff away for free without having to say, ‘Yeah, I’m doing this because I’m an anarchist’; you can say, ‘I’m doing this because I’m a librarian.’”

For Millie, librarianship was a promising alternative to other work that proved disappointing. “When I graduated from college I was a theatre major and I wanted to work in theatre,” she said, “and what I found working in theatre is that everything was urgent but nothing was important. And I find in librarianship, everything is important but nothing is urgent.” Alongside the issue of personal satisfaction was a political dimension: “I also was really motivated by the service aspect of librarianship and libraries as a social good.”

Willie arrived at her decision as an undergraduate research assistant. “I realized in undergrad that I really enjoyed doing research and spending time in a library doing research...and I really loved the fact that I could go up and talk to a librarian and they were just so ultra-knowledgeable about anything I needed to ask them about, and I just thought, wow, to have access to that knowledge...it was really exciting to me, and it just really appealed to my sense of...valuing the library as a resource that anybody could access.” Her alma mater is a public university; accordingly, its libraries are required to serve the public. “[Being open to the public] really appealed to me and my politics of

inclusion and communitarianism and sharing resources.” When asked if this ethical consideration – providing the public with access to information – was a primary motivator for earning her MLS, Willie answered, “absolutely.” She elaborated by explaining her work experience up to that point: “I had spent most of my working life selling things to people, which wore on me, just sort of being an anti-capitalist, and librarians just seemed to be the total flipside of that. So it was definitely a decision that was very much informed by my political values.”

Political Orientation

When asked to describe her politics, and whether she is comfortable with the anarchist label in particular, Pinky answered in the affirmative. “I usually say anti-capitalist, but I don’t worry too much about the labels or the names; I’m comfortable with anarchist, let’s put it that way.” She noted that “you have to be careful who you’re identifying as an anarchist around, because obviously you say that to certain people, they’re gonna think you’re a Black Bloc⁴, shit-starting, grouchy person who can’t get along with other people...so you need to tailor your message to the people you’re actually talking to.”

Millie was more reluctant to identify as an anarchist. “I’m much more comfortable with the label radical, because it distinguishes me from liberal, which I think is a term that has negative connotations. It’s like people who are just too wishy-washy to actually stand up for anything.” She elaborated on the label-conviction distinction, saying “I think my politics are most closely aligned with anarchism and I’ll occasionally refer to myself as an anarchist, but I feel like it’s not very anarchistic to identify as anything,

because then you're kind of subscribing to a set of rules and descriptors that you may or may not sign off on individually." When first getting involved in the profession, she worked with progressive library organizations, such as the Social Responsibilities Roundtable (SRRT) and the Progressive Librarians Guild, but failed to "click" with her new colleagues until she began working with anarchists. "The anarchist book fair is one of my favorite events of the year; I think I like anarchists," she said, laughing.

When asked if she identifies as an anarchist or is more comfortable with the term 'anti-capitalist,' Willie told me she would "definitely describe my politics as anarchist, and I do sort of think of anti-capitalism being part of that. I guess it's a sort of value of anarchism as I define it rather than another label. My anarchism really came out of a pretty unsophisticated theoretical place, which was being a punk and being really involved in DIY projects and community and trying to figure out ways of existing in a subculture, and in a microcosm, that could be applied to other areas of life. So that's kind of in a nutshell where my politics live." Before becoming a librarian, Willie spent many years working in independent bookstores, and though their continued survival remains important to her, librarianship challenged her to "analyze access systemically" and presented her with an opportunity "to be outside of capitalism," which she describes as "a profound discovery for me."

Radicalization

All three respondents indicated that their political orientation was cemented before taking up librarianship.

In Pinky's case, a favorite uncle was an early influence. "[He] was a pretty serious activist; he was one of the Diggers⁵ in San Francisco, and part of a mime troupe, and I think I got a lot of ideas from him. When I was a kid, my dad had a kinda corporate job and my mom lived at home...and they were doing their back-to-the-land fantasy. I didn't see myself there, but when I saw my uncle doing his thing I was like, 'That's what I want.'"

She was also politically active in high school. "I was in one of those students and teachers organized to prevent nuclear war kind of things," she explained, "but I didn't have much of a framework beyond that. I knew what I was against, but like a lot of young people, I wasn't sure what I was for. I hadn't seen an alternative yet that I found appealing except for, well, I'm gonna go be a hippie on the west coast or something like that. But that's not enough to build a life around, or it wasn't for me. So you know, I kind of brought that to librarianship, but I feel like librarianship gave me the framework to think of concrete things I could do to improve things, not just sit around and complain about them all the time."

Millie's political roots also extend back to her early years. "I've been politically engaged since childhood, and actually did civil disobedience for the first time when I was in high school," she said. "My parents were politicians rather than hippies, and I grew up with the politics they shared with me, and I guess helped form me, because I remember even in like, third or fourth grade, doing my current events report on Guatemala and Nicaragua and stuff like that."

Political practice predated her chosen career, but librarianship brought focus to Millie's activism. "After college, I was still working in theatre. I did political theatre, but

I feel like librarianship helped me bring it together in a more complete or organic way. And I guess I'm talking more specifically about my extra-librarian roles, like Radical Reference. I mean, it was really cool; all of a sudden I had this radical librarian posse, and people in the city's activist community knew us, and knew...they could count on us for things. So some aspect of my politics and my librarianship happened at the same time."

For Willie, the answer is more straightforward: "[Radicalization] was long before. I was radicalized through being involved in my subculture and being involved in a punk community when I was a teenager." She carried these politics with her, through college and into the information profession.

Perceptions of and Reactions to Radical Status

When asked how people tend to react to her politics – with incredulity, or laughter, or hostility – Pinky told me it is not something she feels compelled to share with others. "I'm even trying to remember how out I am about it," she said. "It used to come up a lot because people thought, oh, that was so funny, you know? 'Isn't anarchist librarian an oxymoron?' And I'm like, well, there's one moron here, but that's not it. I don't talk about it in town, for instance, because I don't really feel like there's a way to talk about it in town where people are going to understand it the way I mean it."

On the idea of being "out" in the name of battling stigma or marginalization, Pinky explained that "it's important [to self-identify] if you really believe in the things that you believe in, and they're important in a larger world context. There's certain things you can believe in that's private between you and your world. Like, if you've got a kink,

I don't think you've got to necessarily be out about that kink in the name of that kink, unless you're kind of undoing a bad stereotype about that. So, I feel like librarianship has its own kind of stereotype problems, obviously. I think all professions do. And I think anarchism has its own stereotype problems, and some of them are true as far I'm concerned. I don't think it's the end all, be all. I'm not like, 'Everyone should be an anarchist. My goal state is for everyone to be an anarchist.' No! But it's like, you're only alive for a certain amount of time, and you sort of have to live your life the way you want to, and so it works for me. My reputation is solid, so it's ok for me to say, 'I'm an anarchist; maybe anarchism isn't what you think', as opposed to being, 'Yeah, I'm anarchist, and now you probably think I'm an idiot because you think anarchists are idiots'. But sometimes you can actually get some mileage out of people being like, 'What? People like you think things like that?', and you can be like, 'Yeah, you know, if you wanna talk about it I'm here to talk about it, but if you don't want to talk about it I'm not all identity politics about it.'"

Millie, too, has encountered those who find humor in their misconception of anarchism. "People always do like to laugh at the concept of an anarchist librarian. So many people mistakenly believe that anarchism means chaos, so that's annoying." On the reactions of her colleagues in the profession to radicalism, Millie thought for a bit before asserting that, "Librarians, I think, are liberal, and so they have an affinity towards left politics, but the word radical scares them. They don't really like to be super-assertive or put their necks out. I've spoken at Rutgers a couple of times and the person who invites me to talk about activist librarianship always likes to try to poke me about professional neutrality, so I know there's a lot of concern in the profession about, oh, if you have an

opinion then you can't possibly be neutral, which means you can't possibly be a good librarian. Which I have a hard time with because I feel like everyone on both sides of the desk has a lot of assumptions based on the way a person looks, talks, dresses, etcetera. And these assumptions are not without consequences, she says. "[There are places] where it's also a lot easier to be a radical librarian. I think there are jobs I've applied for that I might have gotten an interview for if I didn't have a reputation as a radical librarian, or have Radical Reference on my resume. I'm not positive but there's at least one job that I have Radical Reference on my resume. I'm not positive but there's at least one job that I feel like I was pretty damn qualified for that I didn't get a call back on."

Meanwhile, Willie feels she has not yet arrived at a point in her career where the two identities might have merged. "I don't really put the two together just as a general description of what I am professionally. I guess I should also say that I'm not very immersed in the professional world yet, so I don't have a professional identity just yet. Maybe I will, as an anarchist librarian, at some point. But for now I think that most of the people who do know my politics and know I'm a librarian just feel like it makes perfect sense. And those are mostly people who share my politics and/or are also librarians."

Political Considerations in Library Specialization

When asked why they chose the kind of library (e.g., public, academic, special) in which they have done most of their work, each respondent highlighted factors both personal and political. For Pinky, part of it was geographical. "For the last fifteen years what I've really wanted to do was settle down in [a particular state in the U.S.] I don't hate any of the politicians there. I believe in what I perceive the values of the state to be. The downsides are not deal-breakers for me the way they would be in Arizona or

Alabama or California or a lot of other states that are otherwise kind of neat. So your options [in that state] are really limited.”

Apart from the pragmatic reality of accepting the jobs that are available where one lives, there is a political factor, too, in Pinky’s decision to work for a public library. “From a political standpoint, being a public librarian means that you’re answerable to the public, basically, period. If you’re the public library your job is to be a steward of the public resources and to provide a space for the public. *All* the public. Getting to work in a library means you get to help poor people directly, sometimes just by setting up a policy that’s working to fight for them, or offering a space that’s more welcoming for them, and you can just fricking do it, and if people don’t think it’s a good idea you can fight with them about it because they’re the public, you know? *Everyone’s* the public. And so a lot of what you end up doing in the public library in rural areas, and I think this is also true in big city libraries – and I don’t know if it’s as true for suburban libraries – is leveling the playing field. The public library is for everybody and you get to make that true in word and deed. And you know, to be fair, I’d be lying if I said there wasn’t a sort of Robin Hood aspect to it. You take people’s tax money and you give it to everybody, and that’s awesome. And give me a break, I mean, that’s what we’re doing when we give General Electric a whole bunch of tax cuts, except who does that benefit? This benefits *everybody*, and that’s so awesome. And it lets you be a little righteous pain in the ass, if I’m being honest about it. Because it’s the public – *the public*, you know? Whereas in an academic library you obviously have to prioritize the needs of your students, and that totally makes sense, and it’s completely fine and totally legitimate. Special libraries, a lot of times, you need to prioritize the needs of your organization, which can sometimes be

bad if your organization does not then prioritize you. I mean, there's lots of meetings and stuff in public librarianship, and that's kind of difficult, but it's a small price to pay for getting to do what you do."

Although she ended up in academic libraries, Millie also was initially attracted to the public library's ability to level the playing field. "I originally was attracted more to public librarianship," she said, "but it just sort of happened that I ended up in academic librarianship, and I think I'm more temperamentally suited for it anyway. In library school I also wanted to be a performing arts librarian, so I'm not sure. I guess I had a couple things going on in my head at once when thinking about librarianship. But the part of me that was sort of attracted to public librarianship, it was very much about, you know, bringing information to the people and making – you know, books are so damn expensive, and just being able to get people access to things that they couldn't or didn't want to pay for. I was thinking, at the time, about books, but computers as well."

Willie: "It's something I wrestle with a lot. The very first library I worked in was a college library, and it was a private Catholic college in Brooklyn, and it served a student body that was largely immigrants from the Caribbean. And so it wasn't an elitist institution, and I felt sort of inspired by the fact that most of the students I was working with were the first members of their family to go to college, because that was my situation as well, and I felt like I could see myself continuing to work in settings like that. I mean, I definitely wanted to stay in academic libraries. But after that, especially after I got my degree, I worked in other academic libraries where I felt like most of the people who had the privilege of going to college were people with money; colleges that cost a lot to go to and didn't have very diverse student bodies. So I question often whether I am

working in service of, I don't know, it's really hard to put it in words without sounding like I don't want to be working with rich kids and their education isn't important to me. That's not what I want to communicate. Making up for opportunities [that lower-income students] didn't have is really what I felt as an undergrad, and entering the library for the first time and realizing, oh my God, I have access to all this information, this is amazing. And being able to show a student that they have that same access and empower them in the same way – totally different at an institution where maybe a student has sort of taken it for granted that they can have access to whatever they want.”

Institutional Structure, Hierarchy, and Power Sharing

One of the key questions this study sought to address was the extent to which a radical had to struggle against hierarchical organizational structures, i.e., library work environments that failed to accommodate consensual decision-making, equal power distribution, and otherwise curbed individual liberty through chain of command. Not surprisingly, respondent's answers differed according to their workplace experiences and by library type.

“One of the things I like about rural libraries is they're not that hierarchical,” Pinky explained. “In my town there's a lady in charge and there are three ladies who work for her and there's the board and that's it. So you can actually do a lot of stuff. You have a lot of wherewithal to just sort of go off in your own direction, and as long as it's not actively pissing people off you're probably okay. And we did have one of those very awkward cops-come-to-the-library situations a couple of years ago, and the librarians were like, come back with a warrant. It was unpopular but it was the rules and they stood

up for them. So that may be why I'm never going to move again, because you want to hope that your library is going to act the way you think they're supposed to, but until you've actually seen them do it you just cross your fingers."

Pinky also described ways in which activists can work within the system to effect social change. "Within the ALA, there are a whole bunch of policies and interpretations of the Library Bill of Rights that you can really use to wedge things you think are important into your job, like the Poor People's Policy⁶," she explained. "You can totally use that when you're talking about librarianship or when you're doing your job to be like, 'Yeah, I think we need to serve the homeless, or we need to make an effort to get out to the people who are in prison, or what are doing about domestic violence in our community once we've identified it as a concern?' I see all of those as, not necessarily radical, but definitely stuff that mainstream folks wouldn't necessarily do. Of course there's lots of left-leaning activists who do that kind of stuff, but where I think it takes the turn to more radical politics is you're like, 'What are we doing about the people in prison? You know, the Poor People's Policy says we have a responsibility to them, so what are we doing?'"

For Millie, power was never a problem until she acquired more of it herself. "None of this was an issue for me until I became a manager, which happened fairly recently," she said. "In my previous job and in this job, I've had really great bosses that let me run with my ideas and things were pretty flat, hierarchy wise. So nothing really chafed."

A negative experience with the highest levels of administration at her former employer, however, soured her on managing other people. Before her current position,

“both my jobs had been at institutions where librarians didn’t have faculty status, and they kind of screwed us over...they kind of stripped us of our merit pay, and I really felt that the college president didn’t trust and didn’t respect us, and it really pissed me off. So, it has been a real challenge for me as an anti-authoritarian to deal with being in an authority position. I hate being in situations where I have more power than the other person, and it’s been, yeah, just a huge struggle for me, just sort of personally, to deal with this.”

When asked why she decided to move into management given this struggle, Millie said it was “somewhat to get out of the way. There are so many people entering librarianship that are just brilliant and there just aren’t jobs. And I kind of feel like I’ve gotten to a point in my career where it was time to manage or teach and leave the frontlines, entry-level job for someone else to take. That makes me sound more altruistic than I really am. It was also that after ten years in librarianship I really felt like I wanted a little bit more – I don’t know what the right word is – it’s not exactly status or recognition, but there is something about that. I’m not someone who wants a lot of money or status, but if other people have it I feel like I should have it too. So, if you’re in an environment, even in academia, things still have a little bit of that corporate structure where there are directors, managers, and coordinators and stuff, and all these people in other administrative departments, people have somewhere to go to get promoted, to make more money, or to get a title, and in librarianship we really don’t. I don’t think that’s a bad thing for our work, but it is a bad thing for us personally. It’s just kind of shitty to feel like you don’t know where to go and no one’s ever going to give you any more respect than they did the day you started. So it was half the altruistic, get-out-of-the-way,

middle-aged-lady thing, and part of it was I've been doing a really good job for ten years and I have nothing to show for it. Someday I might like to have a down payment for a house before I retire."

As she wrestled with the discomfort of her current role, Mille also identified her work background as a complicating factor. "I think part of it is my anti-authoritarian nature and part of it is my reference librarian personality type," she said. "I think it is really hard for reference librarians to take authority as opposed to, say, someone in technical services who is much more accustomed to being able to say black-and-white, yes-or-no things, whereas reference librarians, we just want to make people happy. So, politically, it's still really hard. I really hate [being a manager] and I'm considering trying to have a do-over, go back, and get out of this position, but to some extent I feel like I'm not serving the people who are working with me by being wishy-washy, so I'm having to work on being a more clear authority sometimes. I think sometimes, people, they need someone to just tell them what they want from them instead of trying to get someone to guess. And I'm also, quite honestly, having to say I have more authority than this person, but to some extent it's because I either have more experience or more ability or have shown greater judgment over the years. So it's a real struggle. I don't know, can an anti-authoritarian be a boss? It's a good question."

In Willie's case, a potentially compromising organizational structure is mitigated by a surprising factor: an anarchist 'supervisor'. "The library I work at now is within the larger superstructure of the college, which of course is very hierarchical," she said, "but my library itself – I mean, we have a small staff and it's pretty collegial. [The library is]

hierarchically organized, for sure, but my boss is also an anarchist, so that helps a lot. I've never worked for another anarchist before. It's pretty awesome."

She was not quite as fortunate in her former role as a solo librarian in a special library, but found a measure of autonomy through demonstrated competency. "I was a special librarian running their research center. And it was a traditional nonprofit organization: there was an executive director, there was a board of directors, there were associate directors, and one of the associate directors was my boss. And so because we had this little cluster of historical resources staff that was more committed to being collegial and really fighting the limitations of the larger hierarchy, I felt like I didn't have to struggle against it as much as I would have if I was higher up the hierarchy. I was sort of protected from the executive director. But that was really difficult because it was such a blatant display of, like, I'm the guy who's in power and what I say goes even if it doesn't make sense, you know? It was really kind of mad. So my way of negotiating that, and I guess I was lucky to be able to do this because I was a solo librarian, was just to really take advantage of the fact that I didn't have another librarian managing me, which basically convinced them that I knew exactly what I was doing, and they didn't have to worry about me. I really didn't have very much of a conflict, because I was able to just exist outside – not outside of their power structure – but I was just such a, they kind of didn't know what to do with me."

When asked if she aspired to management or could envision herself in that role, Millie was forthright. "No," she laughed. "This job [at the special library], it was just me. I didn't really have anyone working for me, and I didn't have a boss who was a librarian, and it wasn't managing people who were librarians. So I did manage volunteers, I

supervised their work, and that was kind of hard for me. I immediately associate management with a position of authority, and telling people what to do is not my strong suit. I know that there's probably a way to diplomatically manage people in a way that you're not being, I don't know, oppressive about it, but it was really important to me that I was sort of on a very collegial level with the people that I was supervising, especially because I was supervising other librarians and they were librarians who were volunteering, they were not being paid, and I've been in that situation before. It just felt like it was really important for me to treat them as my absolute equals."

Opinion of Professional Organizations (e.g., the American Library Association)

Each participant was asked about her involvement in professional library organizations and discussion centered on the ALA in every case. Each librarian expressed varying degrees of esteem for the Association's work but overall opinion was ambivalent at best.

"I haven't been a member for years," Pinky told me. "I was on Council for three years, I guess. And, you know, it wasn't for me. I think [ALA does] a lot of good stuff; I think they're a giant boat that's impossible to steer. And one of the things that was different for me than [for other activists] is I have sort of a two-pronged thing I give a shit about in the library, and one of them is social justice and the other is technology. But especially among the old guard radicals there was a distrust of technology, which I totally understand, that meant if I wanted to be go-go technology, they didn't sort of support me, and that if I wanted to be go-go social justice, the techie people who were often kind of apolitical or libertarian couldn't really get behind me.

So I found it really difficult and unpleasant to work within ALA, but part of it is just the meetings are early. It's stupid; it's a whiny baby problem to have, but [ALA is] its own thing, and you have to get on its boat or – those are your choices, right? They have these big meetings, you have to travel to them, it gets more expensive when you're no longer a student. ...ultimately the kind of change that I was interested in, which was somewhat dramatic, somewhat rapid, and without having to fight with a bunch of people, I felt like I couldn't do within that organization. I feel like the people who work within that organization are great, they're fighting the good fight, they're trying to do things that are good. I felt like they weren't sufficiently flexible for me personally to get the shit done that I wanted to get done. That I felt bogged down and restrained by having to work through their pathways. You know, we'd vote on resolutions against the Iraq War and I'd be like 'Yeah!' and then they wouldn't distribute them for months. You couldn't even link to it on the fucking website for months, and I was like, 'This is embarrassing.' I feel like it's too slow, and the world is moving, you know? So, it's been interesting to see them lately, I feel like social media has allowed ALA to get kind of outside of ALA; you can be a member of ALA without being a member of ALA, because it's just Facebook. That's where I see a lot of the interesting ideas happening now. So nominally it's an ALA umbrella thing, but realistically it's just kind of a group of young people...who really are like 'come on, let's get some momentum', you know, we can use sort of ALA's organizing power and their name but just to kind of keep things moving. I don't want to disrespect ALA; mostly it's just a bad fit for me. But seeing some of this stuff ever since Jenny Levine, who is the Shifted Librarian⁷, has started working there, things have been slowly happening, and she's also one of those people who can handle it...Individuals

who can say 'yes' or say 'no' and educate other people about the way to be better in the world, I feel like that's what makes bigger differences, and so some people that do that are within ALA, some people are using ALA to do other things. I find that I'm just sort of more effective just being me running around in circles hollering about stuff and everybody's gotta kind of meet their level, whatever that is. There's a lot of people who are being effective through ALA, and the fact that they're a giant organization means the stuff that they do support has the force 30,000 librarians behind it, and that's strong juju."

Millie's experience working inside ALA was a positive one professionally, but she remains skeptical about the organization's ability to accomplish its goals, singling out the Association's unassertiveness as a major weak point.

"I was on ALA Council for three years and when it was time to decide to re-up, I think I asked that question in some sort of public forum, maybe a listserv at the time, and [another anarchist] wrote back, 'The only reason to do that is for the status,' or something. I was like, oh, I guess so. I mean, the ALA Council was a really great experience; you learn a lot. But I realized, no, I really don't want to deal with the bureaucracy and the decision-making and the stupid things that ALA Council – I mean, I don't really mean that, to denigrate the ALA Council, but I realized that for me and my politics it really wasn't – I'm really not a work-slowly-from-within kind of person.

Every year it takes me longer and longer to renew my membership. I think I haven't yet this year. And, I don't know, ALA, it is essential for the lobbying stuff they do, but I don't feel like they do, I don't think they lobby hard enough and, you know, because I was on ALA Council I know a little bit too much, and I mean I could talk for hours on this question. ALA's been really wussy, you know, and I know also from

experience that they would rather be the smallest client of a company than the biggest and I think that's really stupid. ALA just doesn't consider itself a player. It's just not assertive enough as an organization, and I just feel like they spend way too much money on stupid things at conferences like giant banners and what not, so I don't know. I mean, I guess that's where I really kind of am an anarchist, that I don't think large organizations work. I think the United States could never possibly work, and so for the same reason I don't think ALA could ever possibly work. I think societies need to – we need to go back to tribal times. Little groups of a hundred where you know everybody. So maybe that's the problem with ALA; it's just too big to work.

Willie's answer was more straight ahead, owing to her lack of involvement in ALA. Still, she echoed Pinky's and Millie's concerns about the size of the organization.

“ I've never really been involved in ALA. I was a member in library school and I was a member my first year of working in libraries, but I didn't really take advantage of committee work or anything like that. I didn't go to conferences. I didn't really feel that they were my people, you know? And by that I just mean that even before I started library school I got involved with Radical Reference and I felt like that was more my core, that was more my affinity group, that was more how I was going to learn how to be the kind of librarian that I wanted to be and focus on doing the things that are important to me within the profession. So, I think that organizations like ALA, they're sort of too big for their own good. I feel kind of alienated by ALA because I can't even figure out where I would fit in.”

Participation in alternatives to the mainstream library organizations ranged from enthusiastic to nonexistent, depending primarily on a participant's interest in and tolerance for group work generally. Pinky, for example, falls into the latter category.

"I have no patience for listservs anymore," she said. "Listservs for me are now only for people I actually want to chitchat with, not for people who I want to get anything done with. So I'm familiar with the a-librarians listserv; I think I was on it a long time ago. Doesn't solve a problem for me anymore. Radical Reference, I love them, but I don't – it's weird, I kind of do my own thing a lot, and my paths cross with a lot of these people a lot, and so I'm stoked about what Radical Reference does... but on a sort of week-to-week basis I don't feel like I have my finger on the pulse of the radical library groups. So, basically, I'm really conflict-avoidant, which is kind of a weird thing for somebody who's into radical politics, but I don't like to fight with people. I'm not really sure what the deal is. Angry people scare me," she said, laughing.

"I'm good at deescalating, so I feel like I have certain strengths. But like, on ALA Council, for example, there were some people who felt like the way to convince other people was just to rip into their ideas, and so every ALA Council list or discussion that touched on radical politics became toxic almost immediately. I feel like the a-librarians list, if it's the one I used to be on, was kind of the same thing. There were like three jackass guys who fought with each other all the time and fuck that. And so as far as I'm concerned, until we get to the point where people are actually committed to equity of ideas in conversations, I find that kind of thing really difficult. And that there's a couple personalities, this was definitely true with SRRT, who I just kind of can't get along with. One of the sort of weird stereotypes about the radical librarian posse, as I know it in

ALA, was it's a bunch of older dudes and a bunch of young women that they prey on, and I couldn't be around that anymore. And a couple older women who do all the work. And that's embarrassing. That's like with hippies, when you find out that hippies have some of the most normative gender behaviors of any alternative group. The women stay at home and take care of the babies and the men go out and do whatever, and it's just embarrassing. So, like a lot of sort of radical groups that I became involved with...it always turned into a couple big ego guys arguing with each other and, as a result, it kind of soured me on the group dynamic of radical politics generally. So I interact with people, I work on small projects, but I like to think of myself as a sleeper person inserting radical political ideas in places that people don't expect it. Like in the pages of *Library Journal*, like when I'm talking to library school students.

Millie spoke of a strong and sustained interest in alternative library and library-related groups, but showed little patience for halfhearted or intermittent commitment.

"Radical Reference, I'm still as active as anybody is," she explained, "but we've been really pretty lame lately, both on a national answering-questions level and on a local collective level. On the site, I managed to whip everyone into getting all the questions answered, like a week before New Year's. I was like 'Let's get these questions answered!' And now it's March and there's six or seven unanswered questions on the site, so I'm feeling pretty bad about that. Radical Reference should fold up its tent if we can't do what we say we're going to do. And the local collective, we are actually doing something this week, so I'm super excited about that. We're going to the Interference Archive⁸ to see if there's anything we can do to help with that. Josh and his partner, who just died, have both been collecting political posters for years and years and have all this

great political ephemera and they're looking for a little bit of guidance and help on how to organize it and probably just doing the work of archiving it. We're tabling at the anarchist book fair and one of our members who's trying to – in the past we've done these salons, which are peer education sessions that are really great. So I don't know: we may or may not wake up.

As covered in the previous section, Willie is an active participant in the alt-group Radical Reference, having first volunteered with the project since before beginning library school. The group's members are more closely aligned with her views and aims than other librarians in the wider profession. She describes the members of Radical Reference as an “affinity group,” a term of art in anarchist circles with a history stretching back to the Spanish Civil War⁹.

Library School and the Professionalization of Librarianship

Respondents indicated broad support for the concept of library school as grounding in the substructure that informs the mission of library generally. Based on their own experiences of LIS programs, however, they expressed skepticism of how that instruction is currently offered and whether it meets the goal of preparing students for the workforce.

“We like to pretend [earning an MLS] is like being a doctor or a lawyer but it's a lot more like being an electrical engineer or a plumber,” Pinky told me. “It's kind of like trade school where you learn the foundational ideas of the profession, but a lot of what you learn to do is sort of the routines of the profession as well. So on the one hand I feel like it's important that people be educated so they know what the job is about, but I also

kind of sometimes feel like we're fooling ourselves that it *really* matters. In rural America, lots and lots of people don't have library degrees because you can't get a library degree and then get an 11-dollar-an-hour job for 14 hours a week and pay your loans. So I feel like what happens is you wind up with this schism where, and I don't know the numbers on this, you have a huge number of people who are working in libraries as librarians who don't have a formal educational background, and then you have a whole bunch of people who just couldn't get those jobs at all if you didn't have the degree, and I feel like those twains almost don't meet back up again. It's sort of how I feel about library conferences and stuff. There's a really self-selecting group of people that goes to [ALA] conferences. It's not just everyone. You've got to be really interested in the organization and the way your organization works and I feel like ALA really pushes hard in good ways for the profession to be professional. But I also feel like, realistically, ALA isn't a librarian's organization, it's a library organization, and some of their biggest funders and the things that keep ALA afloat are the giant vendor corporations who are actually fucking up libraries nationwide. That's a really awkward thing. [ALA is supposed to] represent everyone, that big tent thing, which...becomes really challenging because the library schools aren't just for the people, they're for the profession. So it's vexing to be in that direction. I mean, you sort of think about, 'Where's the money going?' Lots of students are giving lots of money to library schools to go work in a profession that maybe isn't going to be paying you well enough to pay off those loans. I think that should concern us as a profession and it doesn't seem to. People just seem to think that's normal and I don't think it's normal, I don't think that's okay. So it seems like an imperfect, not great system. [Proposes that continuing ed classes offered through

the state library and other, less expensive forms of certification could offer one alternative to professionalization as it's currently organized] I also think the corresponding issue is, we all see lots of people in library school who aren't very good at what they do, but once you get out with the degree everybody presumes you're qualified, and that's not necessarily true either. Whereas in real professional school, you don't graduate from law school and pass the Bar if you can't do the job or if you don't have the right values or whatever. So it's something I think about a lot and it concerns me, but I'm not sure. I don't have a facile explanation for what exactly that concern is because it goes along a couple different vectors.

Millie's response speaks to the complexity of the topic as it echoes Pinky's refusal to embrace "a facile explanation."

"It's a big topic and it's hard to know what the right political answer is," she said. "I have to say I really value the degree, but I don't value the library school experience. I wish library school was better, more demanding. I think library school has gotten a lot harder, because there's a lot more technical skills to acquire, but I don't know that it's become any more intellectually challenging. I feel like, I don't know whether it's that you get socialized while you're in library school or whether it's just committing a year and a half, or however long of your life, to get the degree, but I feel like people exclusively learn on the job, really just learn from one boss, and they tend not to have very open minds. So I think it's really good to get exposed to as many people as you do in library school, to at least think about things. Maybe you're going to end up doing exactly what your one boss does, but at least you'll have given it some thought as to whether that's the way to do things.

“I have definitely worked with some extraordinarily good librarians who don’t have MLSs,” Willie told me, in explaining her thoughts on the degree. “In some cases there are people who have subject expertise and they have PhDs in fine printing and they’re the rare books librarian. In other cases they were people who had worked in the library for years and years and they weren’t librarians because they didn’t have MLSs either, so I guess that’s sort of the difference, is that, on the one hand there’s experience and on the other there’s expertise, and if you have the expertise then at least in academic libraries they’ll call you librarian and pay you like a librarian, but if you’ve been working as a paraprofessional and you have a bachelor’s degree there’s no way they’re going to call you a librarian until you go to library school. I think that there’s something wrong with that, certainly. I do value what I learned in library school and I don’t feel like I could have gotten a handle on the same skills and aptitudes and theoretical foundations from anywhere outside of library school, in a lot of cases. But I do feel conflicted about it because, I guess because of necessity, right? Libraries not hiring librarians because they can pay paraprofessionals so much less, and I think that the profession’s sort of in a crisis mode right now where that all needs to be figured out and, like I said, I don’t really know where I stand right now because I feel like I can take a lot of practical considerations to hand, on the one hand, but then I also really do value that specialized education. I guess it’s kind of anecdotal, but I feel like it’s really the librarians who have been to library school who seem more passionate about advocating for libraries, librarians, and education in general.

Reactions to this question ranged from philosophical ruminations on the importance of information provision at large to a specific example of the way professional work has buttressed a respondent's activism.

Pinky began with the wide view. "I think that concept of the info desk is kind of a necessary part of big discombobulated events, like protests," she said. "When I was first living in the Northwest I did a lot of temp work, and one of the things I got to do was be at some sort of wacky Armani event where Armani had some crazy sale and special people got special passes to go in and buy Armani stuff for cheap. I don't know anything about the world of fashion, but I got to work at the greeter desk, which is also hilarious because I'm kind of unkempt, but one of the things that was really interesting to me was being that person, being the person who comes in and helps other people make sense of whatever the situation is that they're in – it's sort of like my weird little superpower, you know? But it's a reference desk thing, like learning about the reference interview and how to figure out what someone really wants and knowing some of the things that I learned in library school about how go about solving their information problems, absent information professions. People who want to buy a car, most of them just talk to their friends about it, they don't check *Consumer Reports*. Why is that? Who knows, people are weird. But that kind of thing I felt like you could bring to everything. I have these dreams, these *MacGyver*¹⁰ dreams, where I answer complicated reference questions using whatever I can find around me, you know? Like, here's yesterday's newspaper, and here's my iPhone and here's – I mean, I really feel like iPhones and that kind of internet all the time thing really has this kind of transformative, even disruptive power to give people some of the power we hold in the library in their own hands, to do things like

solve problems and be more effective and whatever. The truth is people aren't using it to be more effective, they're using it to fuck around on Twitter and whatever it is, but you could really get some stuff done. Like, if I have the ability to answer all of my own sort of internal reference questions all the time and I can do that more now than I used to be able to, I could be more effective with whatever I wanted to do. So I feel like a lot of the reference stuff that I learned, we need to be bringing to more and more people. People still don't know how to search for things and find things and whatever, and I feel like the Information Age isn't about getting computers in the library, it's putting, as Dan Chudnov¹¹ puts it, libraries in computers. Like, the whole deal is people become their own librarians but they still need people to teach them how to do that. In my dream world, we'd still have these big beautiful buildings full of books that people would carefully and lovingly curate, but we would also have people around who were deputized in the world to help people solve their own problems using the resources that they have access to if only they knew they have access to them."

In her answer, Millie focused on two specific examples from her recent activist history that drew on library-related work. "Back in the early days of Radical Reference, the idea had been hatched and endorsed by librarians, I think, in the year leading up to the Republican National Convention, but I felt like it didn't really start to crystallize until I went to an alternative media conference in June of that year and all these media people that I told about it, they were like, 'Yeah, that sounds great! Can you put together a fact-checking workshop?' And I was like, okay. I didn't know anything about – I had coincidentally been a fact-checker for two weeks for *Elle Magazine*. So you know, I taught a fact-checking workshop and that aspect of – teaching is the best way to learn, as

I think a lot of us know. The demands or requests of the people that we identify as patrons informed what I did. But it was all very intrinsically connected. When I was really into riding Critical Mass all the time, I started to gather information into information sheets like, my spouse and I and other people organized some communications so people on their ride could keep an eye on where the cops were and what was going on and figure out how to facilitate making the ride a better experience for those of us who didn't want to play cat and mouse with the cops all night.

Finally, Willie presented the strongest endorsement of the ability of library and information work to increase activist outcomes. "I feel like my library practice has really situated my activism outside the library," she said. "For a long time I felt like I was doing a lot of different activist projects and I wasn't really confident that I was contributing in a really meaningful way, just because I wasn't confident in what I could do. Like, I could make zines¹², I could teach workshops, I could stand out in the street and protest – do a lot of just sort of sundry activist skills. But I think once I became a librarian, or even once I decided I was going to become a librarian, I really felt like I had a clear line into what I could offer. Now I'm really excited to work with activist groups or radical organizations on specifically information or research-related work. And it feels really good to be able to have that, to be able to offer [that to] the community, you know? Something very specific and something that I know I'm good at and knowledgeable about.

"In my last job at the historical association, me and my younger colleagues were sort of an oppositional group within the organization because we really valued representing a diversity of voices in our interpretation of history. We were doing public history at an institution that was very much invested in a really conservative, ossified,

glorifying conquest version of history, and we were fully oppositional to that, and the projects we worked on were, you know, not radical, but definitely more progressive in the face of that. And so I feel like in that sense I was really called upon to sort of bring my politics into my work. So, yeah, I hadn't really thought about it that way. I guess I've been kind of lucky to have worked for people that really valued that in my position."

Political Drift and Normalization Over Time

When does a radical librarian cease to be radical, and does her work contribute to this erosion when it occurs? Pinky did not isolate the profession as an influence on political drift but identified several of the factors that lead to decreased commitment over time.

"I think it has to do with your priorities," she explained. "I think for a lot of people politics are not the most important thing in their lives, and for different people that's a continuum of how much or how little they care. I think one of the things about radical politics generally is people tend to be more invested in it, because in order to even make the decision that that's the way you want to go it involves more sort of thought and commitment – and people get tired! Your hobby becomes your politics; then you don't have another hobby. I think there's a lot of people for whom fighting the good fight really gets 'em out of bed every day and they're happy fighting, fighting, fighting until the day ends. But for most people you have to balance that with putting food on the table or whatever, and part of it is just maintaining a peer group. You can live in any number of big cities and find lots of people who share your radical beliefs. It's much, much harder if you live in places that are more conservative. It's much harder if you live in places that

are smaller. So I think with radical politics it's similar, though obviously the choice thing is different. But you know, if you're gay and you live in a small town and it's where you've always been, on the one hand your small town may be close-minded and there may be big problems with it. On the other hand, you have a cascading series of priorities about what you want your life to be. Maybe your sexual identity isn't as important as something else that might want you to stay there, and it's tough to have to make those kinds of decisions. Personally, I feel like I would be more effective if I lived in a big city, but I don't like big cities, so then what do you do? You have to figure out a response to that. Or, whatever, 'fuck other people' is a completely reasonable way to think about it. How can you rest when there's cops beating people, you know? Like, you just want to write lots of letters and be really angry, get the word out, because you know there's tons of horrible injustices in the larger world and in our own backyard, and if you're committed to social justice that's very, very upsetting. I mean, it is for me, and yet you have to find a way to continue to be human and live your life even though there's hungry people in the world. And different people draw the line in different ways, but that's always my big question: how do you keep going despite the fact that, at the end of the day, it's only a tiny, tiny bit better than when you woke up, or maybe it's actually worse. How do you keep going?"

Millie, however, shows no sign of stopping, and does not feel her politics have changed since becoming a librarian. "No, I don't think [I've grown more moderate] at all," she said. "Probably the strongest influence on my activism is having read 2,000 zines in the last seven years. So I feel very immersed in the youth and activist culture over the last twenty years because on any given weekend, when I do my cataloging, I could be reading

a zine from the 90s or one made for the Feminist Zine Fest this year. No, I feel like I'm constantly influenced by young feminists, so I feel like my politics themselves haven't changed, but maybe they've become more nuanced, and maybe working at a women's college made me more focused on women's issues. I feel like my politics are consistent, but my focus is fluid, which I imagine is the case with a lot of people.

Willie, too, rejects the idea that her politics have changed or will change, and bases that assertion on her newness to the profession, the growing difficulty of locating full-time employment in libraries, and the extent to which she wants to invest in careerism.

"I don't have a lot of hope in my ability to work long term as an academic librarian," she explained. "I mean, I've basically been jokingly referring to myself as a migrant worker where I just move to wherever I can get a gig. Right now I'm working a temporary job as a reference librarian. I'm from California and I came to the Northeast to do that, and it's really dismal for academic libraries in California right now. Like, when you ask that, about [middle class comforts], you know, conformity, academic libraries pay well, like, that's all just a fantasy to me. I can't even really imagine that happening to me. And part of that has to do with the fact that I'm not willing to sacrifice other parts of my life for my career. Like, if I wanted to I could move anywhere, I could move wherever, right, and take an academic position. My resume looks pretty good, I have experience, I think I could do that. But my community and my, yeah, it's really my community. My activist community, my family, my context is in California, and I'm not willing to sacrifice something so important for my career. That has to do with my politics, too. Partly in the way that I don't really consider 'librarian' the entirety of my

being. I would love to be able to work forever as a librarian and have this be my only job, the thing that I get to pursue for as long as I want to pursue it, and get paid well to do it. But I just can't make that sacrifice at this point or ever. Maybe that's what will keep me honest [laughs], not being able to give up my community and my projects and my life of – I don't know, I'm in my 30s and I feel like I'm still able to live like an 18-year-old punk sometimes. I make money in short periods and I go and travel and I'm able to work on projects that don't pay anything and make connections with other people, and that's just as important to me as being a librarian.

Balancing Personal Politics and Professional Neutrality

All respondents offered a nuanced take on the principle of neutrality, which rejected the notion of absolute non-bias while maintaining a professionally useful distinction between neutrality in the provision of information as a librarian as opposed to assessing the information as an educator or an individual personality.

“I think it's important to be neutral and to answer the question that somebody asked,” Pinky said, “but I also believe there's a lot more objective truth in the world than people maybe feel like. I feel like you can say that one internet browser is better than another browser for doing a specific job, and I think if parents are showing up to try to find books about how to keep their kid from being gay it's important to give them the books your library has on that topic; but it's also important to make sure that they're able to societally contextualize that question at the same time, you know what I mean? So I believe in being neutral but I think neutral is different from being objective, and I also think it's okay to have a personality. Like, I think privacy may be more important than

absolute neutrality, and part of that is thinking about your collection and having diverse collections and is that the same as having completely objective collections. So I think neutrality as a value is a useful one; I also think that it's completely appropriate to have opinions about the subject. You know, 'Is this a good book about helping my kid from being gay? Not really, it's not very effective.' I think that's a completely appropriate discussion to have with somebody. I know that's a fraught topic. One of the problems SRRT has, at least had, is that there were a bunch of people who I would perceive to be more right-wing-type librarians who would give [SRRT members] a hard time about saying it's totally okay to be gay, completely 100 percent okay, there is nothing wrong with that. Or, you know, the Spectrum awards, which are trying to encourage diversity in the population. I mean, it's the same old saw, right? And I'm lucky that I don't have to have my personal politics come up against my workplace politics any more than that. When I worked at the other public library we used to have to people hollering at us because we didn't have some sort of 'John Kerry is a war criminal' book on the shelves, and 'Isn't it fair and balanced to include these books?' And honestly most public libraries will have a completely balanced right-wing, left-wing, centrist, radical, libertarian bunch of books. But when you get to the point where somebody asks you if this book is any good, I think it's appropriate to say it doesn't work. I think it's a different question. So if people don't ask you for your opinion, fine, here's your book on keeping your kid from being gay. The minute you ask me if it's any good or not, I'll tell you. And I feel like we have weird responsibilities in the library. Print material has already kind of been vetted, sort of, by the publisher, and one of the things about the crazy world of the information explosion is you can find anything in print nowadays. And so how much we need to

vouch for the books that are in our library is an interesting and weird open question for the profession.

In the opening moments of her answer to this question, Millie arrived at the crux of the tension inherent in library neutrality. “I feel like it’s not possible,” she said, matter-of-factly, before going on to explain, “I mean, I don’t push my views on people, so I think I do actually maintain a certain professional neutrality. But I think part of the radical left that really distinguishes us from the radical right is pushing people to probe the veracity of the information that they’re seeing, so in that sense I may be someone who wants people to question the authority of the work, of the literature they’re reading, or the research they’re gathering. I helped an undergrad a couple weeks ago who was putting together a paper, and she asked me to go through her citations, and she wanted to cite a PowerPoint that she found on the internet that was by a high school teacher, and something else that was another undergrad’s work that was just posted on their professor’s web page, and so, you know, you want to teach students to be suspicious of all of their research, but yeah, there is a political dimension to it, like, who is supporting this, where did the data come from?”

Willie was even more straightforward. “I don’t believe that any person can be neutral. I don’t really believe in neutrality. I think that we all have a responsibility, I mean, educators especially have a responsibility to acknowledge that everyone brings bias to a situation. And I think that’s also part of being a good librarian: introducing students to that as an aspect of critical information literacy, like, understanding the bias in every piece of information. So I guess I just kind of take it for granted that nothing is neutral to me.

Anarchism and Intellectual Property

In some ways this was the least radical area of inquiry, if only because the issues of copyright and intellectual property, as they apply to library practice, offer little room for compromise. Resistance, as such, occurs entirely within the prevailing regime.

As Pinky puts it, “I think if you’re a completely anti-copyright person you’re not going to be happy working in libraries, but I also feel like you can completely work for moderate reform within the limits of the legal process, and I also feel like there’s a lot of really normal libraries that are pushing the envelope on how we do some of the stuff that we do. It’s really the balance between intellectual property (IP) and the public’s right to have access to it that’s the most important part of that, not being supportive of IP as the most important part of that. And I think this comes up specifically with digital content because there’s no right of first sale. All digital content can be locked up in terrible, horrible ways, not because of the IP of the creator necessarily but because of the rights holders just deciding to be dicks about it. And I think it’s appropriate to be like, ‘Look, IP is important because it helps people make a livelihood from their creative efforts, we support that, but we don’t support the fact that Houghton Mifflin’s revenue stream is going away because they have an outdated business model.’ And they’re holding up the intellectual property flag as if that’s the reason! They’re being ridiculous in terms of lending digital content, you know, like they care about the people who write their books. They totally don’t; they care about maintaining their own status quo. So I feel like you need to be able to examine who’s really sticking up for what and why before you decide how hard you’re going to go on which side. I think copyright in the U.S. is broken. I

think IP as a construct is what we have for living in America, like it's part of what you have to deal with by living in a society. If you believe that all IP is thievery, you're going to have a hard time finding a good compromise position. I'm a big free culture movement person, generally. I think there's lots of stuff that's technically locked up in copyright, but realistically no one cares, so it's better to share it until someone tells you not to. I feel like the path is decent civil disobedience and not outright denial of the fact that IP is a real thing that a lot of people care about."

Millie's response may indicate the mindset of many or even most librarians: that copyright is an area of concern that should be taken seriously, but one that recedes from view during the day-to-day work of the library.

"There's so many people that are interested in copyright and fair use issues that I've kind of, like, just not bothered. I mean, I really love the 'fuck copyright' status that a lot of zines I read have. In my writing, my copyright or fair use status will just be something like 'don't be a dick,'" she said, laughing.

"My partner is an open source programmer, so I've been pretty influenced by listening to him speak about open source software licenses and how someone needs to claim ownership to protect [the software]. I just don't think you're going to get a great answer from me on this. I care about it, but just don't have brilliant things to say."

Willie's answer may be the most interesting in terms of what it suggests about the current state of legal issues education for new professionals and the consequences of underdevelopment in LIS curricula.

"I wish I knew more about [copyright]. In a few different jobs, especially the last one at the historical society, I was really mired in it because I was responsible for the

archives and a huge photo collection and, you know, people wanted to use photos for publishing. Sometimes it was publishing stuff, sometimes it was posting [pictures] on a blog, sometimes it was illustrating their paper, or whatever. I feel like I did as much as I could to get the information into people's hands and let them use it the way they wanted to use it. Especially because I knew they weren't infringing on anything by doing that, but I also just felt like – I feel terrified of not knowing what the laws are, and it's totally grey, right? I feel like I put in so much time trying to understand where we stood and I still just felt terrified by the fact that I'd read in books, 'You know, you just have to do your best and hope that you don't get served,' you know? A lawyer comes calling you [laughs]. So reading stuff like that I would just feel, I'd feel pretty terrified by it. But again, I come from a background where it's totally common to use other people's images to illustrate your zine, or make your poster, or, I mean, that was all very much part of DIY and making art in our community, and so it's hard for me to reconcile that little world to the bigger world that I'm now trying to negotiate as a librarian.

Analysis

Career History and Political Considerations in Library Specialization

Choice of workplace was in each case determined by pragmatic rather than political factors (not surprisingly, no respondent had worked for a corporate library). Pinky worked in several different types of library early in her career but eventually settled on the public library, not because of its mission primarily, as one might suspect, but because she was intent on living in a particular U.S. state where “your options are really limited.” That the values enshrined by the public library align with her professional and activist concerns is no less important, however, as we will see later on.

Millie was initially attracted to public libraries for their commitment to equity of access across demographic lines – the value of “bringing information to the people,” as she put it – and for helping to level the playing field for low-income people who cannot afford to purchase books or computers. An interest in the performing arts, however, kept her linked to academia, and she chose to remain in academic libraries because the work suited her personality better.

Willie’s early experience of a public academic library introduced her to the personal gratifications of the helping professions. Her second appointment in a private college, however, reduced her ability to help the underserved, making her choice of library workplace “something I wrestle with a lot.” Ultimately, her professional work depends on the jobs available in whatever place she happens to be. She described herself as a kind of wandering soul, unwilling to commit to one location if it interfered with her connection to family, community, or her activist work. For her, the ability to “make money in short periods,” travel on the proceeds, and “work on projects that don’t pay anything and make connections with other people” trump considerations of library type.

Future studies could seek to determine whether radical politics significantly influence specialization or whether pragmatic concerns hold greater sway a majority of the time. Migration from one library type to another, e.g., leaving an academic library for a public one, is another direction for future research.

Career Motivation

Like many patrons-cum-librarians, all three respondents described a personal history of appreciation for the library and its services, but the profession’s values –

reducing economic barriers to access, offering community programming, maintaining public space open to everyone regardless of class, creed, or ethnicity – most influenced their decision to work in libraries. For Pinky, librarianship was simply an extension of the activism she'd "always done," only it came with the bonus of introducing her to like-minded colleagues who could "get shit done." That library projects sometimes suffocate under layers of bureaucracy was something Pinky stressed, especially in her opinion of the ALA. But on a local level, she has had great success working in a small "self-identified community" that delivers on its stated goals without requiring "eight million freaking committee meetings." Millie was more direct; librarianship presented an opportunity to do important work in service of the social good. And for Willie, a "politics of inclusion and communitarianism and sharing resources" were important motivators that moved her to earn an MLS.

Both Millie and Willie described disenchantment with a previous career as a motivator for taking up librarianship. For the former, it was work in theatre, which had proved urgent and unimportant, an exasperating combination. In Willie's case, it was a growing dislike for the retail frontlines and participation in the basic transactions of capitalism, an obviously uncomfortable arrangement for a self-described anti-capitalist.

The role of occupational dissatisfaction in Millie's turn toward librarianship is somewhat unique, owing to the small population of professional dramatists, but future research on a larger scale might investigate the extent to which retail jobs, and intolerance for that work on political grounds, spurred workers into the librarian ranks.

Worth noting is Pinky's assertion that librarian-activists can sometimes engage in social work that aligns with their political convictions, not because of those convictions

but in the name of the job. In her words, librarians can “just go out and be awesome for the public library and set up programming and give stuff away for free without having to say, ‘Yeah, I’m doing this because I’m an anarchist’; you can say, ‘I’m doing this because I’m a librarian.’” This implies that an activist can sometimes use the librarian label, which is socially accepted, commonplace, and carries positive associations, to do activist work that satisfies an orientation around anarchism.

Political Orientation

No respondent rejected the ‘anarchist’ descriptor outright, but no one applied the label without seeking to nuance it first. Pinky noted that she is comfortable identifying as an anarchist and “doesn’t worry too much about the labels or names,” but her initial response to the question of political orientation is telling: “I usually say anti-capitalist.” She also explained how crucial it is to modify the message of that political position depending on the audience.

Millie was even more straightforward, saying “I’m much more comfortable with the label radical” because “it’s not very anarchistic to identify as anything.” She feels that to do so is to buy into an ideology that claims to be representative of all individuals in a group, which conflicts with the anarchist principle of individual autonomy.

Willie, too, identified her politics as being in close alignment with anarchism but described coming to the theory naturally as a reflection of practices adopted by a punk subculture that freely repurposed unlicensed images and celebrated autonomy and creativity through its do-it-yourself ethos. She was also quicker to describe herself using terms like ‘radical’ and ‘anti-capitalist’ than ‘anarchist’.

The impression that emerges from these interviews is one of reluctance to embrace the term, not because of discomfort with its principles but because of the baggage, or because the rejection of inflexible labeling is more authentically anarchist than proudly using that identification. Anarchism comes with a host of built-in assumptions, historical precedents, and mistruths, which can be difficult, not to mention time-consuming, to cover in an informal setting. It is easier and strategically sound to maneuver as Pinky suggests, by “[tailoring] your message to the people you’re actually talking to.”

Radicalization

In all three cases radicalization occurred during adolescence, long before entering librarianship. The progressive and alternative views of family members were important catalysts for Pinky and Millie, both of whom described early efforts at political activism as high school students. Willie’s views were radicalized at or around the same age when she fell in with a punk community, a “microcosm” that welcomed and supported her vision of society.

Worth noting, however, is the role that librarianship played in providing structure and focus to Pinky’s and Millie’s inchoate political ideas. The profession provided a “framework” for Pinky and helped channel her frustration and anger at injustice into “concrete things I could do.” Millie describes her politics and the profession coming together in a way that made her practice “more complete” and “organic.” The title of Librarian and the training that came with it also had the effect of strengthening her

reputation as a reliable and trustworthy person in her city's activist community; its members knew "they could count on us for things," she explained.

This last point is an interesting one. If it is true that librarians have a stereotype problem, as Pinky suggested in our interview, then the prevailing image is of a stuffy, buttoned-down schoolmarm, eager to suppress joy and noise, content only in studious silence¹³. But this widely held perception of librarians as rule-abiding conservatives may aid the radical librarian by helping to increase trust or by lowering defensive barriers in those predisposed to mistrust radicals in general and anarchists in particular.

Perceptions of and Reactions to Radical Status

Not surprisingly, two respondents have experienced firsthand what is probably a typical reaction when someone is first introduced to the concept of an anarchist librarian: incredulous humor. Both Pinky and Millie expressed a degree of weary frustration with this ignorant appraisal, which, however harmless, still lands like a groan-worthy punch line. In fact, the subject of Pinky's politics is not one that she's eager to raise, which challenges the idea of anarchists as aggressive and belligerent. Her first reaction to this question was to rack her brains remembering, "how out I am about it." And any notion that all anarchists are out to recruit others around to their way of thinking is tossed on its ear when Pinky expresses her reservations about anarchism. For her, it is not "the end all, be all." Furthermore, she believes that some of the stereotypes that dog anarchism may be true.

While acknowledging the importance of visibility for minority viewpoints, preferences, and lifestyles, she was also quick to point out that there are few opportunities

to discuss anarchism in her community without being misunderstood. Far better to live in quiet alignment with one's convictions while building a reputation around your work, integrity, and citizenship. Once that reputation is established and one is recognized as a trusted community member, even politics as polarizing as anarchism can be introduced without the automatic recoil and shutdown that often accompanies fear borne of ignorance. For Pinky, a key point is that politics are only one dimension of her life, not an all-consuming passion that demands fealty from others. Which begs the question: when do radicals begin to shift into a less combative approach to political investment? When do they lose their radicalness?

Millie highlighted a different (and dangerous) dimension to other people's perceptions and interpretations of her views: professional consequences. Having a reputation for radicalism raises the specter of bias in the minds of some. For those who stress the importance of a librarian's absolute and unfailing neutrality, being a radical librarian means bringing bias into every transaction. This is a notion that all three respondents reject; yet Millie described one situation (and a friendly one, at that) where she had to explain how one's personal convictions do not in every instance corrupt the ability to carry out duties with integrity. And such an explanation may not be enough, as Millie's experience with job rejection indicates. A radical's reputation may spell real consequences in terms of employment and promotion.

Institutional Structure, Hierarchy, and Power Sharing

In some instances the radical librarian is blessed with a structurally flat workplace, or one in which hierarchy is only cursorily acknowledged. In Pinky's library,

for example, there is a director and a board, and presumably these actors have the final say when it comes to making decisions that affect the library. In practice, however, the librarians are left to their own devices and allowed “to just sort of go off in your own direction,” greatly reducing the likelihood of chafing against the edicts of an inflexible supervisor or the constraints of bureaucratic red tape.

When sizing up a library’s culture and whether or not a radical can thrive within it, there may be other considerations more important than title and the power that comes with it, as exemplified by Pinky’s anecdote about the police visiting her library without a warrant. Her colleagues hewed unwaveringly to the third principle of the ALA’s Code of Ethics, risking unpopularity or worse to protect their patrons’ privacy, and won the day. This episode was impressive enough to Pinky that it “may be why I’m never going to move again.” Ideals and high-minded words on a website are one thing, but when tested, her library turned word into deed. This powerfully illustrates that other factors such as individual and institutional behavior, regardless of how power is distributed, may ultimately prove to be more determinant than the fact of hierarchy alone. Or to put it another way, is unenforced hierarchy really hierarchy at all?

Furthermore, Pinky makes plain that she is not above working within a system to pursue her goals. This is a sticking point for some. When describing her dissatisfaction with the ALA, for example, Millie explained, “I’m really not a work-slowly-from-within kind of person.” Pinky, on the other hand, sees opportunity in ratified policy such as the Library Bill of Rights. Interpreting the Poor People’s Policy to extend library services to prisoners, for example, or to provide a safe space for the homeless, enables a radical to harness the power, weight, and influence of the organization in order to create and sustain

programs that have real benefit on individual lives, programs that Pinky feels even well-meaning “mainstream folks wouldn’t necessarily do.”

One of the key questions that emerged during this discussion is whether an anarchist can ever be a manager and find a way to square the resulting power imbalance against her politics. For Willie, new to librarianship, the answer was an unequivocal ‘no.’ Pinky, meanwhile, works only part-time at the library and as an independent consultant the rest of the time, making management a non-issue for her. Millie, on the other hand, recently assumed a supervisory role and struggles with the expectations and responsibilities of the position, namely directing the work of other librarians. Not surprisingly, she feels deep discomfort in the role, using words like “hate,” “challenge,” and “struggle” to describe having more power than others. She contemplates “trying to have a do-over, go back, get out of this position.” That she took it at all, however, gets right to the crux of holding anarchist views while working inside organizations that incentivize hierarchy, offering employees paths toward promotion, greater pay, and the increased freedom and protection that such things can bring.

She is not someone “who wants a lot of money or status,” but Millie cannot help but resent her stasis while colleagues doing similar work move up the ladder. She feels she has nothing to show from ten years of good work and acknowledges the impossibility of certain goals – owning a house – while remaining in the lowest paying positions. Attaining greater rank brings with it a certain measure of protection, too, as Millie’s previous job experience demonstrates. Having faculty status could be interpreted by some radicals as holding a position of authority or increasing one’s personal power at the

expense of living one's ideals, yet that status is instrumental in protecting librarians from marginalization, arbitrary pay cuts, and layoffs.

The psychosocial tension evident in Millie's rhetorical question – "Can an anti-authoritarian be a boss?" – is evident also in the admission that her authority is sometimes justified due to her demonstrated "experience," "ability," and "greater judgment over the years." She feels that not sharing this knowledge and experience with her subordinates is to do them a disservice: "I feel like I'm not serving the people who are working with me by being wishy-washy, so I'm having to work on being a more clear *authority* sometimes" [emphasis mine]. Nothing about this stance is inconsistent with anarchist ideology per se, but the anti-authoritarian gladly relinquishes her authority once its purpose is made irrelevant, i.e., when subordinates, through instruction and education, are no longer subordinate. As Howard Ehrlich and his anarchist co-editors put it, "Expertise and nonhierarchy can co-exist only if specialization does not convey special privileges; only if people who are experts do not monopolize or control resources or information; and only if people are committed to cooperative and collective work rather than destructive competition" (Ehrlich et al, 1996). The trouble, of course, is that positions of authority rarely expire once their goals are met; indeed, they are simply sustained until an organization vacates them due to redundancy, budget cuts, or other workforce pressures. The challenge for the radical boss, then, is to strike a compromise with that she can live with, arriving at a balance that allows her to endure the distasteful parts of management, such as disciplining poor performance, while using the authority to better her library. Millie is new to this position, so it is not yet possible to determine whether this balance is one she can create. It would be interesting to follow up with her in

a year's time to discover her success or failure in this regard. And generally speaking, the fraught nature of 'radical management' itself suggests future directions for research.

Opinion of Professional Organizations (e.g., the American Library Association)

No respondent is currently a member of the ALA, and in each case the reason is clear: size. Simply put, all three believe the organization is too large to effectively and efficiently accomplish its goals. Pinky described it as "a giant boat that's impossible to steer," making direct action and dramatic change next to impossible. She used words like "big," "expensive," "slow," and "inflexible" to describe ALA, and described her experience inside the organization as one of restraint, of being "bogged down," of fighting against people who only partially shared or did not share her interests and ambitions. This was "difficult," "unpleasant," and "embarrassing." Millie was even more direct, saying, "I don't think large organizations work...it's just too big to work." Additionally, she criticized ALA for its fecklessness and timidity, describing it as "wussy," an organization that "doesn't consider itself a player," and one that doesn't lobby hard enough for the interests of its constituents. Willie, though lacking the experience of the other two participants, noted that she simply feels alienated by ALA owing to its size: "organizations like ALA, they're sort of too big for their own good," she said.

No respondent was especially eager to criticize ALA; in every case disinterest was the result of poor fit rather than anger or disappointment with the organization itself. Pinky explained, "mostly it's just a bad fit for me," reserving praise for specific members within ALA who are "fighting the good fight" and "trying to do things that are good."

For Pinky, the actions of the individual are paramount, which is consistent with the grassroots, “each one teach one” activism that anarchists regularly engage in.

“Individuals who can...educate other people about the way to be better in the world, I feel like that’s what makes bigger differences, and so some people that do that are within ALA,” she said. Millie, too, tempered her criticism by acknowledging that serving on ALA Council was “a really great experience; you learn a lot,” before explaining that her recent lack of involvement was due to personal factors: “I really don’t want to deal with the bureaucracy,” and “I’m really not a work-slowly-from-within kind of person.” Again, personal fit, or lack thereof, was the primary determinant in Willie’s nonparticipation: “I didn’t really feel that they were my people.” She finds greater affinity in parallel groups like Radical Reference.

Alternative Organizations and Affinity Groups

Participation in alternative organizations was determined by individual inclination and ‘fitness factor’ rather than obligation to search out an affinity group to extend one’s activism. Pinky was the most vocal on this point. “I kind of do my own thing,” she told me. “I’m just more effective being me, running around in circles hollering about stuff.” She has experience with parallel professional organizations, including a former subscription to the a-librarians listserv and service to the ALA’s Social Responsibilities Roundtable, but in either case the experience “soured [her] on the group dynamic of radical politics” when what should have been productive conversations devolved into “a couple big ego guys arguing with each other.” As someone who describes herself as conflict-avoidant, Pinky is skeptical about the long-term success of any group that cannot

“[commit] to equity of ideas.” Having experienced the absence of this baseline respect too many times over the years, she prefers a “sleeper” status that allows her to quietly work in individual ways to improve her community and, hopefully, the world at large.

Conversely, Millie is someone who enjoys working inside radical groups, namely Radical Reference, but also tabling at anarchist book fairs and riding in Critical Mass¹⁴ demonstrations. For her, problems begin when a group fails to follow through on its stated goals. She was somewhat critical of Radical Reference, a group in which she is heavily involved, for allowing submitted questions to go unanswered. She spoke in harsh terms about this oversight, saying “Radical Reference should fold up its tent if we can’t do what we say we’re going to do.” Although she sees signs that the group is past its doldrums, maintaining a certain level of activity is crucial to her involvement.

Willie, as noted in the last section, is someone with a great affinity for the members and work of Radical Reference, having joined the group as a library school student. The members were “more my core...my affinity group,” and she felt she could better learn from them how to be “the kind of librarian that I wanted to be and focus on doing the things that are important to me within the profession.” Apart from organizing resistance to their political opposites, like the group’s protests during the 2004 Republican National Convention, Radical Reference serves a didactic purpose as well.

Library School and the Professionalization of Librarianship

Across respondents, opinions were mixed on the value of library school and the MLS. Each participant feels there is value in training students on “the foundational ideas of the profession” and its routines, but all expressed a measure of skepticism as to

whether the schools are making good on this goal and whether it is justifiable to indebt students for the degree.

Pinky was forthright in knocking down the pretension that the MLS is in anyway like the kinds of certification earned by doctors, lawyers, and other career professionals. Instead, library school is a trade school, its graduates “more like...electrical engineer[s] or plumber[s].” She was careful to note that education is important and new grads should know something about the profession they are entering, but in many cases library schools fail to certify their students’ preparedness. “We all see lots of people in library school,” she said, “who aren’t very good at what they do, but...with the degree everybody presumes you’re qualified, and that’s not necessarily true.” Meanwhile, she works with and has worked with librarians who lack the MLS yet perform the responsibilities of their jobs with aplomb. This complicates the standard line that an MLS is required to do the job. It also creates a question around the growing expense of earning an MLS, and for Pinky this is a serious concern. Universities are only too happy to take the tuition dollars of would-be librarians, but if there is no berth for that person in the workforce or if the job does not pay a salary sufficient to overcome any debt incurred, then what is the “value” of a library school education? “I think that should concern us as a profession,” Pinky maintains, “and it doesn’t seem to. People seem to think [taking out student loans is] normal, and I don’t think it’s normal, I don’t think it’s okay.”

Millie, too, was positive in her assessment of the degree and the exposure to new ideas that earning it provides. “It’s really good to get exposed to as many people as you do in library school,” she told me, so that students do more than mindlessly replicate their experiences as interns. Still, she registers a complaint that is familiar to anyone

researching library schools: the vacuous content of the curriculum. “I wish library school was better, more demanding,” she said. “I don’t know that it’s become any more intellectually challenging.” The MLS is regularly described as a “union card”¹⁵ (or worse) by librarians who hold the degree. If library school is indeed just a series of proving tasks that fail to develop students into critical thinkers and innovators, then why “[fool] ourselves that it really matters,” as Pinky put it?

Willie’s answer offers a partial response. She too has worked with paraprofessionals whose work is equal to that of her degreed colleagues, but she offers an upbeat assessment of library school. The degree it offers creates job security and higher pay for librarians in academic libraries. Furthermore, Willie does not feel that she “could have gotten a handle on the same skills and aptitudes and theoretical foundations from anywhere outside library school.” For her, there may be an element of artificial distinction in separating MLS holders from paraprofessionals, but earning the degree is a “necessity” that would-be librarians must face unless they relish the idea of being paid less (if they are employed at all).

The through-line in each case is that objections were leveled not at the concept of library school but at its conception, i.e., the programs currently offered and the rising cost of attending them. Notably, each participant stressed the value of being educated in the profession’s mores, with Willie arguing that those earning the MLS tend to be “more passionate about advocating for libraries, librarians, and education in general.” Dashed is any suspicion I might have had upon entering this study that a radical would recognize the entire enterprise of library school as illegitimate. Rather, they question the legitimacy

of an intellectually hollow exercise that nevertheless plunges novitiates into unsustainable levels of debt. And when phrased this way, it hardly seems radical at all.

The Influence of Library Practice on Activism

All three participants agreed that library work had had a measurable effect on the quality and delivery of their activist projects, namely in taking reference and information services out of the libraries and into the streets. Pinky highlights the importance of the info desk, not just inside libraries but in all “big discombobulated events, like protests,” or even within corporate-commercial environs, like her Armani temp job. The info desk offers refuge for the overwhelmed and confused. It is a orderly space in which anybody, anywhere can use the information resources at hand to make sense of a perplexing situation, “whatever the situation is that they’re in.”

Increasingly, the info desk is not a desk at all but a smart phone. Pinky explains how her iPhone has dramatically increased her ability to answer not just the questions of others but her own internal questions as well. Her phone is the reference desk miniaturized and made mobile. A cornerstone of Pinky’s activism is bringing the power of information, which used to be stored away in warehouse-like libraries, to “more and more people.” The problem? People still have difficulty searching for information with precision and need help sorting the good from the bad, the vetted and verified from the bogus and misleading. The core concepts of information literacy are badly needed by a population increasingly dependent on information. Librarians, with their specialized training and acuity in this area, are a natural fit for meeting this need. “The whole deal,” as Pinky says, “is people become their own librarians, but they still need people to teach

them how to do that.” The info-seeking skills that used to live only behind the reference desk are now being mobilized and marched out the library doors, and activists like Pinky are giving the marching orders.

Millie’s extra-library work with Radical Reference also demonstrates how information-seeking skills have opened new pathways for contributing to the causes that are important to her. When organizing resistance to the RNC in 2004, for example, alternative media activists and journalists were informed about Radical Reference, then in its early stages. They recognized immediately a librarian’s valuable skill in accurately assessing the veracity of information inside an environment thick with half-truths, hearsay, and unverified rumors.

The Critical Mass pathfinders she creates before each ride offer another example of the type of work that occurs behind reference desks day in and out, in libraries around the country, only these sheets were assembled on Millie’s own time, outside the boundaries of her workplace. It may not be a smart phone, but this humble one-sheet helped “people on their ride...keep an eye on where the cops were and what was going on,” demonstrating the value of this low-tech but traditional information resource.

For Willie, librarianship helped her bring something more abstract but every bit as powerful to her activist work: confidence. She admitted to feeling unsure about the value of her contributions when agitating for social change, describing her skills as “sundry,” or not important enough to be elaborated individually. “Once I became a librarian,” she explains, “I really felt like I had a clear line into what I could offer.” With professionalization and the skills acquired during library school came the recognition of a role she could fill in her community: the information specialist. Now, when her projects

require research or “information-related work,” Willie is excited to meet that need and to do so with expertise. “It feels really good,” she says, “to be able to offer [that] to the community...something that I know I’m good at and knowledgeable about.”

Political Drift and Normalization Over Time

Normalization, Pinky explained, is often a consequence of burnout rather than any drift owing to the siren song of middle class comforts. Radicals make deep personal investments in their politics, which often acquire an overriding importance, crowding out other pursuits like the hobbies that function as relief valves. And very often, politics are subordinate to “putting food on the table” or any of the thousand quotidian tasks and responsibilities that make up an adult’s life in the 21st century (e.g., holding a job, buying clothes and groceries, keeping up with housework, etc.) It can be hard enough finding time, energy, and resources to make room for an active political life while meeting the other responsibilities incumbent upon those who do not yearn to live a semi-itinerant lifestyle of the kind Willie speaks of with fondness (“I’m in my 30s and I feel like I’m still able to live like an 18-year-old punk sometimes. I make money in short periods and I go and I travel...”)

Additionally, the radical without a supportive peer group in which to refresh her ideas and enthusiasms, one to receive with sympathy the occasional catharsis of grief and frustration, is a radical who may be headed toward resignation. Millie speaks to the importance of this aspect when she discusses working at a women’s college and her regular reading of political zines from youth and activist cultures. These activities have

not only “made me more focused on women’s issues,” they function as a kind of peer group, helping to keep a proverbial hand on the rudder of her politics.

In the end, each person can only be accountable to herself. Pinky’s admission that her activism would be more effective if she lived in a big city is no admission at all, because she has no desire to do so. As she explains, “different people draw the line in different ways.” Willie openly doubts that she will settle into a fulltime academic library job in her current situation due to a line she has drawn for herself. She would “love to be able to work forever as a librarian and have this be my only job,” but not if that means quitting on her community in California, her home. “My activist community, my family, my context is in California, and I’m not willing to sacrifice something so important for my career.” She jokes that maybe this will keep her “honest,” and for her, that may be true. While Millie dreams of having enough money for a down payment on a house, Willie greets the mere idea of well-paid, fulltime employment with skepticism. When I suggested that a salary, benefits, and status might create reluctance in the radical to act in ways that might damage those comforts, Willie was blunt: “that’s all just a fantasy to me.”

Ultimately, Pinky’s question lingers: “How do you keep going despite the fact that at the end of the day it’s only a tiny, tiny bit better than when you woke up, or maybe it’s actually worse. How do you keep going?” For those unable to assuage the inevitable disappointment that intense political investment can bring, the answer would seem to be, you don’t; you give up. For each of these participants, though, the solution lies in owning one’s limitations, acknowledging one’s preferences and desires, and “[finding] a way to continue to be human.”

Balancing Personal Politics and Professional Neutrality

On the value of neutrality as it applies to the information professions, neither Millie nor Willie were buying the concept. Both felt that to be human – and to be human is to be political in one area or another – is to carry bias. Neither feels this bias corrupts her professionalism, however. Rather, the acknowledgment of bias is itself among the key responsibilities that librarians have in their role as educators¹⁶. And neither women “pushes [her] views on people,” to borrow Millie’s phrase. For all three participants, encouraging patrons to critically and skeptically assess the value of information is a different proposition altogether than propagandizing from behind the reference desk.

Pinky locates more value in neutrality as a professional ideal but distinguishes it from recognizing facts as such. As she puts it, “there’s a lot more objective truth in the world than people maybe feel like.” For her, fulfilling a patron’s request for information in an impartial way is different from making a value judgment on the quality of that information. Her example of books on conversion therapy lucidly illustrates the separation between these two practices. A patron requesting books that purport to cure homosexuality should receive the books if the library can supply them. A patron wishing to know if such books are *effective*, however, has entered into an entirely different proposition, one in which Pinky feels it is perfectly acceptable for the librarian to have a personality and a viewpoint. In this case, the librarian would be well within her rights to answer the question, “Is this a good book about helping my kid from being gay” with the blunt and factual reply, “Not really, it’s not very effective.” This situation places the librarian in the position of fact-checker, editor, and information analyst, and Pinky

wonders if that is perhaps an emerging responsibility for the profession. With the staggering amount of information available in print alone, people can locate virtually any kind of information and often in wildly variable states of quality and integrity. “How much we need to vouch for the books that are in our library,” she says, “is an interesting and weird open question for the profession.” Such an investigation is outside the scope of this paper, but it raises any number of questions about a librarian’s jurisdiction over information, the degree to which she is responsible for providing access to questionable or bad information, and the ethics of serving in a gatekeeper capacity.

Anarchism and Intellectual Property

On this question Pinky was blunt and to the point: “I think if you’re a completely anti-copyright person you’re not going to be happy working in libraries.” It is hard to disagree with this statement. After all, item four of the ALA Code of Ethics, printed on every membership card, reads, “We respect intellectual property rights and advocate balance between the interests of information users and rights holders” (ALA, 2008). Pinky feels the radical’s position is not to wage a profitless war against U.S. copyright law by ignoring or abusing its strictures, which runs the intolerable risk of plunging the individual and her library into costly legal liability. Instead, copyfighters should recognize that the spirit of intellectual property – “To promote the Progress of Science and useful Arts”¹⁷ – is different and independent from the ways in which the law is sometimes twisted by rightsholders to keep content locked up in digital rights management or other restrictions that run counter to the progress copyright was meant to inspire. As she puts it, it is important to recognize that our concept of and

protections for intellectual property are important “because [copyright] helps people make a livelihood from their creative efforts, we support that, but we don’t support the fact that Houghton Mifflin’s revenue stream is going away because they have an outdated business model.” In other words, picking a fight with copyright law is a losing battle, but pressing for reform of the law through alternative licensing schemes such as Creative Commons or generating evidence that demonstrates how library lending drive sales, these are the kinds of accomplishable reforms that can ameliorate some of the worst abuses under the current copyright regime. And at the bottom, working within the confines of copyright law is for Pinky an acceptable and necessary compromise, one that comprises an unavoidable “construct...for living in America.” Improving that construct means walking a path of “decent civil disobedience and not outright denial of the fact that intellectual property is a real thing that a lot of people care about.”

Real, yes, and deeply confusing too. Or simply not worth paying much attention to, as is the case for Millie. “There’s so many people that are interested in copyright and fair use issues that I’ve kind of not bothered,” she told me. Although she cheers the rejection of copyright in some of the zines she reads and claims no rights for herself (“my copyright or fair use status will just be something like ‘don’t be a dick’”), she was honest in telling me “I just don’t think you’re going to get a great answer from me on this. I care about it, but just don’t have brilliant things to say.”

Willie echoed this sentiment, saying, “I wish I knew more about it.” Her position relative to copyright was one of fear – fear of being held liable for an accidental infringement resulting from lack of knowledge. “I feel terrified of not knowing what the laws are,” she told me, “and it’s totally grey, right? I feel like I put in so much time trying

to understand where [the library] stood and I still just feel terrified by the fact that I'd read in books, 'You know, you just have to do your best and hope you don't get served.'" Part of this fear comes from her background in punk and DIY cultures, which freely, even gleefully appropriate copyrighted images for use in street art, zines, record sleeves, and other cultural artifacts. Willie sometimes finds it hard to "reconcile that little world to the bigger world that I'm now trying to negotiate as a librarian."

It seems fair to say that Willie's fear and Millie's lack of "brilliant things to say" also stem from a lack of education on the subject. The ALA's Core Competencies of Librarianship reads in part, "A person graduating from an ALA-accredited Master's program in library and information studies should know and, where appropriate, be able to employ . . . the legal framework within which libraries and information agencies operate," but the extent to which LIS programs and student internships are meeting this requirement is difficult to know (and outside the boundaries of this study). If this case study is any indication, there is great need for a thorough and consistently applied primer on copyright education and on the other legal issues that a librarian might encounter in the daily routines of her work.

Conclusion

This study sought a better understanding of the motivations that bring anarchists to librarianship and to investigate the ways in which their library practice conforms to or differs from their politically mainstream colleagues. The testimony of three radical librarians reveals a pragmatism that, upon reflection, is not terribly surprising. To live as an American citizen, to participate in society, and especially to work within highly visible

institutions like libraries is to make room for compromise, particularly when your politics live on the margins of conventional thought. The alternative is endless frustration, even despair, at the gulf that lies between the world as it is and the way one thinks it ought to be. More immediate is the simple reality that libraries, to a greater or lesser extent, reproduce the dominant ideology in which they are situated, which means that anarchist principles may fail to take root in a given workplace. At the end of the day, there are managers, board members, politicians, and taxpayers – members of a hierarchy – and they may be less interested in consensual decision-making than librarians behind the reference desk.

What is the value of the radical librarian then, if the workplace effectively neutralizes radicalness? Why make the distinction at all? Because in the final analysis, radicals help us aspire to the highest ideals of librarianship by valuing and vigorously defending them despite the setbacks and frustrations that come with the job. Because radicals dream the biggest dreams of what the library is, what it stands for, and what it can do to help all of society instead of ceding concessions at the outset in the name of practicality. Like the protesting Parisian youths of May 1968, they implore us to be realistic – demand the impossible! In this moment of enormous upheaval and uncertainty in the profession, we are all better for it.

Notes

¹ Anarchist principles are applied to other systems of political theory and action, for example, anarcho-feminism, anarcho-primitivism, and queer anarchism.

² The a-librarians listserv is available at lists.mutualaid.org/mailman/listinfo/a-librarians

³ The proper names in this study are pseudonyms, borrowed with no significance whatsoever from the Robert Altman film *3 Women* (1977). The decision was capricious but convenient.

⁴ A Black Bloc is a collection of anarchists and anarchist affinity groups that organize around a particular protest action; it is not itself an organization, but a tactic. More information is available at infoshop.org/page/Blackbloc-Faq

⁵ The Diggers (1966-68) were a group of communitarian anarchists and improvisatory actors based in the Haight-Ashbury neighborhood of San Francisco. Their namesake, the English Diggers of 1649–50, championed agrarianism and a society comprised of small, egalitarian rural communities.

⁶ Chapter 61 of the ALA Policy Manual, “Library services to the poor,” aka the “Poor People’s Policy,” reads in part, “The American Library Association promotes equal access to information for all persons, and recognizes the urgent need to respond to the increasing number of poor children, adults, and families in America.”

⁷ Jenny Levine’s blog is available at theshiftedlibrarian.com

⁸ The Interference Archive is “an international collection of a variety of media and art produced by both protest and counter-cultural movements...founded on the belief that these ephemeral and aesthetic materials are important for understanding social history as well as contemporary cultural practices.” More information is available at interferencearchive.org

⁹ According to *The Anarchist FAQ*, the term ‘affinity group’ “comes from the Spanish F.A.I. (Iberian Anarchist Federation) and refers to the organisational form devised in their struggles for freedom (from ‘*grupo de afinidad*’).”

¹⁰ *MacGyver* was an American action-adventure television series that ran for seven seasons on ABC from 1985 to 1992. Its protagonist, Angus MacGyver, is a resourceful special agent with an encyclopedic knowledge of science, able to solve complex problems with everyday materials.

¹¹ “Libraries in Computers” is a column by Daniel Chudnov that appears in the magazine *Computers in Libraries*, available online at infoday.com/cilmag/default.shtml

¹² According to Duke University’s Sallie Bingham Center for Women’s History and Culture, zines are “short for fanzines” and “have been in existence since the 1930s, when they served as a form of communication among science fiction fans. In the 1990s, with the combination of the riot grrrl movement’s reaction against sexism in punk culture, the rise of third wave feminism and girl culture, and an increased interest in the do-it-yourself lifestyle, the women’s and grrrls’ zine culture began to thrive.” Such political zines are predominantly the kind read and cataloged by Millie, and from which she draws inspiration.

¹³ Consider the domineering librarian played by Georgia Backus, who watches William Alland like a hawk as he reads an unpublished manuscript in the opening minutes of *Citizen Kane*. Martin Raish, former librarian at Brigham Young University, described her as “the world’s meanest archivist.”

¹⁴ Critical Mass is an event typically held on the last Friday of every month in over 300 cities around the world in which cyclists meet at a set location and time, and travel as a group through their municipality. These meetings, which are sometimes interpreted as political protests, draw attention to eco-friendly transportation, the reclamation of public space, and other goals that vary from event to event.

¹⁵ See, for example, Wordwoman’s comment on this MetaFilter thread: ask.metafilter.com/210625/Would-a-lover-of-learning-be-satisfied-by-library-school

¹⁶ It is also part of ACRL’s “Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education,” available at ala.org/acrl/standards/informationliteracycompetency

¹⁷ Article I, section 8, clause 8 of the U.S. Constitution, a.k.a. the Copyright Clause

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Appendix

Appendix A: Recruitment Letter

Email subject line

Invitation to participate in a Library and Information Science research study

Email body

Greetings,

My name is Michael Hughes, and I am a student at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, seeking a Master's degree in Library and Information Science. I invite you to participate in a research study titled "The Impact of Ideology on Library Practice: A Case Study of Three Radical Librarians," which is being conducted under the advisement of Dr. Jeffrey Pomerantz, SILS (UNC). The purpose of this study is to better understand the motivations that bring anarchists to librarianship and the different ways this political philosophy impacts library practice and work-life.

You are eligible to participate in this study if you a) are currently working as a librarian or information professional and b) practice a form of left-libertarian political theory.

Your participation will involve an in-depth interview that will be conducted over the telephone or voice-over-internet protocol (VoIP). The interview questions will cover a range of topics, including your library work history, your political opinions and beliefs, and the intersection of the two. Your perspective on various components of the library profession, such as its professional organizations, will also be solicited. The interview will last approximately 45 to 60 minutes and will be audiotaped. You also may be asked to participate in follow-up phone conversations and/or email exchanges as needed. The total time for these follow-up communications will be no more than 30 minutes.

Your involvement in the study is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate or to stop at any time without penalty or loss of benefits. All the research data including any of your personal information will be kept confidential and will be held in a secure location. The results of the research study may be published, but your name will not be used. Your identity will not be associated with your responses in any published format.

The findings from this project may provide information that will contribute to a more complete picture of the library and information science workforce and a greater appreciation of the role that radical librarians play in upholding the profession's core values. There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this research.

If you would like to participate in this study, or if you have any questions about this research project, please feel free to send me an e-mail at hughesmj@live.unc.edu, or call me at [redacted].

Thank you for your consideration! Please keep this letter for your records.

Michael Hughes
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hughesmj@live.unc.edu

Dr. Jeffrey Pomerantz
Associate Professor
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pomerantz@unc.edu

Appendix B: Study Consent Form

Study Consent Form
University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill
Consent to Participate in a Research Study
Adult Subjects

IRB Study # _____

Consent Form Version Date: _____

Title of Study: The Impact of Ideology on Library Practice: A Case Study of Three Radical Librarians

Principal Investigator: Michael Hughes

UNC-Chapel Hill Department: SILS

UNC-Chapel Hill Phone number: [redacted]

Email Address: hughesmj@live.unc.edu

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Jeffrey Pomerantz, pomerantz@unc.edu

What are some general things you should know about research studies?

You are being asked to take part in a research study. To join the study is voluntary.

You may refuse to join, or you may withdraw your consent to be in the study, for any reason.

Research studies are designed to obtain new knowledge that may help other people in the future. You may not receive any direct benefit from being in the research study. There also may be risks to being in research studies.

Details about this study are discussed below. It is important that you understand this information so that you can make an informed choice about being in this research study. You will be given a copy of this consent form. You should ask the researcher named above any questions you have about this study at any time.

What is the purpose of this study?

The purpose of this study is to better understand the motivations that bring anarchists to librarianship and the different ways this political philosophy impacts library practice and work-life.

You are being asked to take part in this study because you are or were a library employee and because you practice a form of left-libertarian political theory.

How many people will take part in this study?

You will be one of three people in this research study.

How long will your part in this study last?

Your participation in the interview process will last approximately 45 to 60 minutes. Follow up phone calls, if necessary, will not exceed a cumulative total of 30 minutes.

What will happen if you take part in the study?

If you take part in this research study, you will be asked questions about your library work history, your political opinions and beliefs, and the intersection of the two. Your perspective on various components of the library profession, such as its professional organizations, will also be solicited.

The interview will be recorded using an audio recording device and the researcher will also make written notes. You may decide to consent to the interview and decline being recorded. If you consent to being audio recorded, you also have the right to ask that the machine be turned off at any point during the interview.

Check the line that best matches your choice:

- OK to record me during the study
 Not OK to record me during the study

What are the possible benefits from being in this study?

Research is designed to benefit society by gaining new knowledge. While there may be no direct perceivable benefit to you from being in this study, the conclusions drawn from this study will contribute to a more complete picture of the library and information science workforce and a greater appreciation of the role that radical librarians play in upholding the profession's core values.

What are the possible risks or discomforts involved with being in this study?

We do not anticipate any risks involved in this study; however, you may experience emotional discomfort in revealing beliefs or opinions that some participants would rather not share. You have the right to refuse to answer any questions posed by the researcher.

How will your privacy be protected?

The only person who will have access to study data will be the researcher. You will be asked before the interview begins to choose a first and last name to use as a pseudonym throughout the interview. Your real names will not be used on the interview transcripts or in the final research report. The key to the pseudonyms will be kept in a password-protected file on the researcher's computer and will be destroyed when the study is completed in April 2012. The researcher's interview notes will also refer to you only by your pseudonym. These field notes will be destroyed along with the interview transcripts one year after the study ends. Other identifying names and places mentioned throughout the interview will be changed by the researcher in the transcripts and in the final research report.

What if you want to stop before your part in the study is complete?

You can withdraw from this study, decline to answer any question for any reason, or end

the interview at any time, without penalty.

Will you receive anything for being in this study?

You will receive \$20 at the end of the study.

Will it cost you anything to be in this study?

It will not cost you anything to be in this study.

What if you have questions about this study?

You have the right to ask, and have answered, any questions you may have about this research. If you have questions, complaints or concerns, you should contact the researcher listed on the first page of this form.

What if you have questions about your rights as a research subject?

All research on human volunteers is reviewed by a committee that works to protect your rights and welfare. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, or if you would like to obtain information or offer input, you may contact the Institutional Review Board at 919-966-3113 or by email to IRB_subjects@unc.edu.

Subject's Agreement:

I have read the information provided above. I have asked all the questions I have at this time. I voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.

Signature of Research Subject

Date

Printed Name of Research Subject

Signature of Research Team Member Obtaining Consent

Date

Printed Name of Research Team Member Obtaining Consent

Appendix C: Interview Schedule

Pre-interview:

Introduce self, including name, affiliation, and student status. Explain what the study is about and why it is being conducted. Confirm that the subject: (a) identifies as an anarchist or left-libertarian, (b) is at least 18 years old, (c) consents to participating in the interview, and (d) consents to being recorded.

1. How long have you worked as a librarian?

1.1. What kinds of libraries have you worked in or are currently working in?

2. Why did you decide to become a librarian?

2.1. Was this decision influenced or motivated by your politics?

3. Describe your politics. Do you identify as an anarchist? Why or why not?

[For the purposes of this interview schedule, ‘anarchist’ will substitute for the many adjectival divisions within the spectrum of left-libertarianism -- or not; disagreement is instructive]

4. Were you radicalized before entering librarianship or afterward?

5. How do people react when they learn you are both anarchist and librarian?

6. Were there political considerations in your choice of specialization or library type? (e.g., reference/instruction v. technical services; special, academic, or school library)

7. Anarchists believe in the abolition of illegitimate authority and hierarchy, preferring horizontal power structures, voluntary association, and consensual decision-making. This is not true of the structures in many, even most libraries. Please describe your own library in these terms and expand on the extent to which it replicates the larger culture’s ideology. Do you make any effort to resist such arrangements, and if so, how?

8. What is your opinion of the professional membership organizations, ALA foremost among them?

9. Do you participate in alternative organizations/associations such as Radical Reference, the a-librarians listserv, etc? If yes, how? If not, why?

10. Please share your thoughts on library schools, ALA accreditation, paraprofessional status versus degreed librarians, and the professionalization of librarianship generally.

11. In your experience, how are anarchist librarians received within the profession? With surprise or confusion? Hostility or humor? Respect and understanding?

12. To the extent possible, do you separate your politics from your work life? Why or why not? If not, to what extent are you comfortable or permitted to bring politics to bear on library decision-making or on your individual duties? (e.g., creation of politically-motivated bibliographies, subject headings, displays)

13. How has your library practice impacted or shaped your activism outside the library?

14. How have your views changed over the years and what role, if any, did librarianship play in influencing this change?

15. What are your thoughts on librarian “neutrality”? Do you uphold or eschew “objectivity” in fulfillment of your workplace responsibilities, such as providing information through reference transactions?

16. To quote Walker Lane from *Fifth Estate*, “Asking the state to protect one's [intellectual] property seems inconsistent with the values of anarchism.” Item IV of the ALA Code of Ethics, meanwhile, reads, “We respect intellectual property rights and advocate balance between the interests of information users and rights holders.” What are your thoughts on this seeming incongruousness?

17. Are there any questions you wish I had asked you, or are there points you'd like to add about the role of radicals in the profession?

18. Thank you for your responses. If necessary, may I contact you again to clarify my notes from the interview?