

Delegitimizing Censorship: Contending with the Rhetoric of an Anti-Democratic Movement

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ABSTRACT

Attacks on library collections and library workers have reached a fevered pitch. To effectively combat these threats, library advocates and organizations must move away from debate and dialogue about specific challenges and move towards a political communication strategy that actively disrupts these openly anti-democratic censorship movements. This is a moment of rhetorical disruption; along with the texts and the books that are being perceived as harmful, library workers are now being portrayed as threats to society, being called “groomers” who seek to “indoctrinate” children. Contending with the true nature of this evolving rhetoric is essential to be able to respond appropriately and avoid normalizing these debates. If libraries and our communities are to prevail in the defense of intellectual freedom, free expression, and cultural representation, censorship simply cannot become ordinary. This paper examines the ways in which the rhetoric of censorship operates, the ways it risks becoming normalized, and the ways in which libraries, librarians, and their supporters can work to counteract and delegitimize this rhetoric.

Introduction

Public libraries have been considered a beloved institution in American life throughout their history, and yet, throughout that history, they also have consistently failed to appropriately advocate for themselves and the communities they serve (Buschman, 2018; Buschman, 2016; Chrastka, 2018; Ndumu, Dickinson, & Jaeger 2020; Weigand, 2015). The ramifications of this lack of effective advocacy has recently come to the forefront in a new and disturbing way as today’s energized drive for censorship has moved beyond content-based book bans and into criminalization of the practice of librarianship itself (Jaeger, Jennings-Roche, & Hodge, in press).

Recent research shows a substantial number of Americans now believe that public libraries are actively seeking to indoctrinate their children, a radical departure from being one of the most trusted professions (Public Religion Research Institute, 2022). While there have been other periods of uproar over specific books in United States history, the threats to libraries and library workers today have reached a heretofore unheard-of level of public

outrage and practical threats to library workers (Jaeger, Jennings-Roche, & Hodge, in press, Jaeger et al., in press) This is a moment of rhetorical disruption. Now, not just the texts and the books themselves are being perceived as harmful, but librarians and library workers are now being portrayed as “groomers” seeking to “indoctrinate” small children (Hatzisavvidou & Martin, 2022; Public Religion Research Institute, 2022). This shift from the direct challenge of books to the broader rhetoric of neoliberalism and parents’ rights is pernicious and, thus far, has achieved an alarming level of resonance with large portions of the public. If we do not understand the nature of this rhetoric, library advocates will be unable to respond appropriately.

Pro-censorship movements have risen to the forefront of public discourse throughout American history — always in response to changing social conditions for previously marginalized groups of people (Jaeger et al., in press). While the specifics of some book challenges may be new, the political activation of American citizens based on intentionally manipulative rhetorical strategies from right-wing politicians and activists is hardly unique and treads a well-worn path in reactionary social discourse.

Censorship in an Age of Disconnection

The United States is in an era of profound social and civic strife, and that discord is playing out in battles over library collections and the work of librarians across the country. While the conflict may not be a new one; the tenor of these challenges is uniquely vitriolic. Nationwide, “our lack of participation in our communities and our lack of trust in our government and for traditional leaders had left a nation vulnerable to attack” (Mercieca, 2020, p. 24). Libraries as physical and ideological representations of both community and government are both particularly vulnerable, and have proven a particularly useful target for “rage baiting” right-wing extremists in the ongoing fight over social progress (Molloy, 2019).

Library advocates must understand and take seriously the real material threats to our collections, institutions, and personnel. Protecting our libraries, library workers, and communities is essential for the long-term welfare of the public good. Studying and ultimately developing effective responses to the shifts in rhetoric and communication will give library workers and advocates the ability to turn the tide against these incendiary attacks. Underlying these attacks are ongoing changes and cultural reimaginings (within right-wing, extremist rhetoric) of the meanings of books, libraries, and library workers. Understanding these changes is especially important, because, “although social and political changes become actualized through practical, material changes that take shape in policies, production and consumption patterns, behavior changes, and so on, such forms of transformation also require change in the use of language” (Hatzisavvidou, 2022 p. 192). The languages and rhetorics employed by this movement belie the larger cultural and social campaign, and should be a red flag for library workers and advocates.

Censorship in this current moment is fundamentally about deploying “social power and influence to proactively impede access to cultural goods” (Knox, 2021, p.13). Those seeking to impede access to collections and dictate how library workers do their job are doing so to silence and obscure the voices and perspectives of those whose opinions the attackers feel do not have a right to full and active participation in American society. These battles over books that reflect the lived experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/questioning,

Intersex, and Asexual, Plus (LGBTQIA+) and Black, Indigenous, and Persons of Color (BIPOC) peoples are merely an opening salvo in a larger war to actively strip civil rights from fellow Americans (Clarke & Wilson, 2022). It is absolutely essential that those campaigning to preserve access and inclusion reckon with the true nature of this conflict, which is heavily dependent on persuasive rhetorics of what is safe and who is an American.

Current LIS Advocacy Strategies Risk Normalization

By not calling out the pernicious nature of the rhetorics of these attacks and instead acting as if there is a good faith disagreement on the merits of individual books, library advocates risk normalizing the far-right extremist influences of this current social and political movement. Libraries often provide a point-by-point breakdown of how and why each book is acceptable instead of dismantling the arguments and tactics of the reactionary movements themselves (American Library Association, 2023, Gabbatt, 2022). As Jason Stanley stated in his prescient 2018 book, *How Fascism Works*, “what normalization does is transform the morally extraordinary into the ordinary” (p. 190). If libraries and our communities are to successfully defend intellectual access and free expression, and thereby an equitable society, censorship simply cannot become ordinary.

As an essential starting point, library advocates need to reorient their current messaging and toolkits to align with the current political reality. Right-wing, extremist activists and politicians are not operating in good faith and are not willing to listen to sincere pronouncements about the literary and educational value of targeted books. Each time a library campaign engages with a book challenge on the merits of the complaint, the process of normalizing arguments over the limits of acceptable censorship is reinforced. “Normalization means precisely that encroaching ideologically extreme conditions are not recognized as such because they have come to seem normal” and these challenges are anything but normal (Stanley, 2018 p. 190). Thus, it is self-defeating to respond to them if they are normal.

For a field that is actively engaged with the work of dismantling structural oppression and epistemicide, perhaps of even greater concern are the larger cultural and social ramifications of these kinds of debates (Patin et al., 2021). By engaging in this way with right-wing, extremist speakers, we risk normalizing “debate” over the lived realities of minoritized and socially oppressed peoples and communities. Legitimizing debates and (ostensibly) good faith disagreements over appropriateness of content risks further marginalizing the very people our most ardent advocates are attempting to protect.

Library advocates should not engage in this kind of direct dialogue over threatened texts, but should shut down this kind of rhetoric at every turn. These things are not up for debate. Therefore, library advocates should not engage in debate on the merits of racist/sexist/homophobic/antisemitic/extremist/fascist arguments at any point in our political advocacy work. Understanding and implementing alternative communication strategies is essential to not only protect libraries and shut down censors, but to respect the human rights and the dignity of those who right-wing extremists are seeking to harm and further marginalize.

Rhetoric Matters

This current wave of book bans, and accompanying attacks on librarians, signals a shift in rhetoric, in which there is an ongoing “redefinition of terms and categories to expand or retract meaning,” particularly as it pertains to the role and meaning of librarians in American life (Hatzisavvidou & Martin, 2022, p. 150). Rhetorical analysis “is concerned with the situated forms that discourse takes as a series of arguments within a particular context,” and while the context here is a political firestorm over library collections, the rhetorical moves of the movement parallel a much larger cultural movement (Hatzisavvidou, 2022, p. 153).

Taking the time to unpack the constitutive rhetoric inherent in the communications of this movement is essential as libraries and their advocates grapple with an evolving political reality. Constitutive rhetorics “reaffirm or reconfigure accepted demarcations of social space, and to affirm as well as challenge established sources of cultural authority, bonds of affiliation, and institutional relationships” (Jasinski & Mercieca, 2010, p. 318). Thanks to social media, we can see such reconfiguring happening in real time as librarians are no longer being referred to as trusted public servants, but are being described in terms such as “threat” or “groomers” (Greene, 2022).

Social progress and its attendant changes in language and to “established sources of cultural authority,” have also been met with censorious activity in the past (Jasinski & Mercieca, 2010, p. 320). In the Comstock era, the work of the Postal Service was wielded as a means of restricting access to materials related to women’s rights (Cockrell 2019; Sohn, 2021). During the Cold War, McCarthyism meant that fears over communism and alternative political viewpoints were inflamed to the point that libraries were forced to remove related materials (Richards, 2001; Robbins, 1996). The contemporary censorship movement may currently be focused on issues related to LGBTQIA+ rights and racial social justice, but the ideological perspective is much the same.

Much like the McCarthy or Comstock eras, weaponized fears over changing social norms, current political actors have created a whole new reality where books, libraries, and librarians become an existential threat by pure rhetorical re-creation of reality by a small concerted group of speakers (Jaeger et al., in press). While it would be easy to dismiss language as existing in the purely theoretical sphere, understanding the connection between rhetoric and legal policy illuminates the dangers of not taking such speech seriously. Indeed, “like law, rhetoric invents; and, like law, it invents out of something rather than out of nothing. It always starts in a particular culture and among particular people. There is always one speaker addressing others in a particular situation, about concerns that are real and important to somebody, and speaking a particular language” (White, 1985, p. 695).

These concerns over specious claims of sexualizing children and promoting anti-American materials in the boogeyman of critical race theory are made real by the speakers of such falsehoods. Those speakers, namely politicians, activists, and “concerned parents,” are speaking a particular language to a particular audience, which does not include library workers, or even the general library-supporting public, — they are instead riling up a weaponized and vocal minority of citizens in order to enact their regressive social agenda.

Politicians like Bill DeSteph of Virginia and Marjorie Taylor Green of Georgia make extraordinary claims about the dangers posed by libraries and librarians, as well as the content of children’s books and young adult novels, in order to direct the vitriol of their constituents at institutions dedicated to public access. DeSteph, according to reporting in *The*

Virginia Mercury, went so far as to say, “I think it’s a sad state when our children are safer turning on the TV or radio than perusing their local school library” (Cline, 2023). Greene often relies on similar incendiary rhetoric for all sorts of political issues from gun violence to calling for a “national divorce,” and has stooped to calling library defenders “groomers” on Twitter (Slodysko, 2021; Greene, 2022; Murray, 2023). This kind of language and rhetoric goes far beyond the norms of democratic political disagreement and is being intentionally wielded by right-wing, extremist politicians to foment fear and rage among their followers. Fear and rage that are being directed at libraries and librarians.

Parents’ Rights, Neoliberalism, and Wielding Government Power to Enact Reactionary Policies

These rhetorics are not purely rooted in fear or in anger, but, as is so common in American discourse today, these particular uses of language and political communication are deeply rooted in the neoliberal impulses to commodify all aspects of American life (Buschman, 2012). Libraries, as public services, do not naturally conform to the demands of neoliberal ideology, despite the field’s ongoing insistence on communicating value by those standards (Buschman, 2020; Jaeger & Sarin, 2016). Expectedly, though, right-wing actors have taken that idea and run with it, insisting that each school and public library conform to the whims of their implied customers and markets. By focusing on the idea of consumer and market demand, and not on any form of social or educational best practice – it is easy to take the step of removing unfavored items from collections.

Conceding to a consumer demand – real or imagined – to limit collections would be the proper response for public institutions beholden to such values. In fact, “the neoliberal economic ideology mandates that decisions of governance be based on what is best for markets, meaning that economic, political, and social decisions are all driven by market concerns and organized by the language and rationality of markets” (Jaeger et al., 2017, p. 355). Book banners understand this market-driven impulse and are harnessing it to undermine any kind of expertise or legitimacy lent to libraries as public services, and educational institutions.

In fact, politicians have started to explicitly call for free market/neoliberal solutionism in trying to claim that their calls for censorship are reasonable and rooted in other existing social norms. Republican Virginia Senate member Bill DeSteph said in an interview: “What we’re seeking to do is, like you have parental controls on your telephone, your computer or at home on your TV, we want to put parental controls at the library” (DeFusco, 2023). This language is not only explicitly neoliberal, but it misses the fundamental difference between voluntary guidelines adopted by a private industry and the imposition of government restrictions on speech, in clear violation of constitutionally protected First Amendment freedoms (U.S. Const. amend. I). Public libraries and libraries within public schools are publicly controlled, governmental institutions that cannot and should not operate as if they are private corporations. The First Amendment has very little to do with policies implemented by media corporations to protect their bottom line, but it has everything to do with the laws regulating the public sphere.

Educational institutions in particular have become familiar with coming under attack by groups of parents who have been intentionally spun up in service of a regressive social

agenda. Neoliberal impulses fit handily with a call to respect parents' rights in classrooms, curriculum, and collections. There is a renewed focus on leveraging the rhetorics and arguments of parental rights as a means to assert control and further marginalize the perspectives of targeted populations. This kind of language has been used to call for everything from vouchers to private school to a right to keep children from receiving proper sexual education (Schneider & Berkshire, 2020). A huge reason this kind of discourse has caught fire at such a rapid pace is "because the neoliberal approach to educational reform has been so successful in reframing public education as a private good to be consumed" (Slater, 2022, n.p.). That framing has provided an excellent structure upon which the most reactionary organizations have been able to build and improve upon at breathtaking speed.

One of the groups at the vanguard of this movement, the self-proclaimed Moms for Liberty group, hearkens to this idea with their central slogan of "we do not co-parent with the government" (Craig, 2021). While on its face, such a rhetoric would call for the removal of all government influence in educational settings. Instead, it is a shrewd means of obscuring their intent to leverage local and state-level governments to enforce their ideas of whose voices and perspectives are valid and valued in our institutions. In reporting from *The New York Times*, a Florida activist makes this intellectual and rhetorical tightrope walk explicit:

"This is not about banning books, it's about protecting the innocence of our children," said Keith Flaugh, one of the founders of Florida Citizens Alliance, a conservative group focused on education, "and letting the parents decide what the child gets rather than having government schools indoctrinate our kids" (Harris & Alter, 2022, n.p.).

Clamoring to keep the [federal] government out of their parenting, while essentially harnessing the power of state and local government, does not at first glance make sense to those outside of the particular rhetorical norms of this movement. However, socially regressive and fascist movements are not historically concerned with the logical conundrums posed by such conflicts. Rather, their often wholly created linguistic reality allows for government to be government while not really being government if it is in service of the group's interests (Stanley, 2018).

These current censorship groups are using identity-based ideas and language to subvert currently acceptable norms of complaints over children's books. Instead of making ostensibly good faith arguments over the tone or content of a particular text, this movement seeks to leverage local governments, and ultimately the local police and judiciary, to enact their demands by criminalizing the fundamental tenets of librarianship (Jaeger, Jennings-Roche, & Hodge, in press). This rhetoric also builds and reinforces group identity.

Language Signals Belonging in Reactionary Social Movements

While intentional collaboration between each of these seemingly organic state and local coalitions to attack library workers and collections may not be something evident or provable to those outside of these rhetorical cultures, the consistency of the messaging paints a clear pattern of coordinated rhetoric and a shared ideological outlook from the would-be censor. There are clear communities and even "tribes" being imagined and affirmed in the digital

sphere, often extending well beyond local or state boundaries (Cowan, 2021). This movement is not merely focused on issues related to libraries and their collections, but in these attacks, has found a way to reinforce the ideological commitments and fears of its members.

By focusing on the collections and library workers under threat, it can be easy for library advocates to overlook the very real political transformations signaled by these movements. Newly re-emboldened, right wing movements in the United States have coalesced around a pretty consistent and succinct set of ideas. In fact, Francesa Tripodi's "Five F's of Conservatism" developed in *The Propagandist's Playbook* can provide a useful framework for investigating this intersection of seemingly disparate ideas. The ideological tenets of "faith, family, firearms, forces, and free market" provide a bridge between voters and politicians (2022, p. 26). For this group:

"Political success is about defining both the Right and the nation in a particular way, emphasizing boundaries that clearly demarcate who is included and who should be excluded. A central component of this unification strategy centers around the idea that the country must be taken back and that American values must be preserved. Compounding this fear and distress over being underdogs in their own country is a feeling documented by other scholars: that conservatives tend to think about social change and civil rights progress as a zero-sum game: if liberals are gaining power, conservatives must be losing ground" (Tripodi, 2022, p. 27).

In this zero-sum game, control of libraries is a way to further "demarcate...who should be excluded" (Tripodi, 2022, p.27.) Using this logic, social change, even in the form of charming children's books about penguins, cannot be allowed to stand unchallenged (Gomez, 2018).

The current movement may indeed derive some of its legacy from the Regan-era neoliberalism, but has rhetorically and intellectually progressed far beyond a capitalistic, or even a conservative understanding of our country, and into one that is running headlong into all-out facism. As "fascist politics seeks to undermine public discourse by attacking and devaluing education, expertise, and language," libraries are the most logical target for those who are set on the project of curtailing all forms of "intelligent debate" (Stanley, 2018 p. 36). Those seeking to censor are not concerned with the justice-oriented, or even merely logical, reasoning of library workers, instead they have openly created a new reality in which they are blatantly manipulating the emotions of parents and community members to enact their agendas and build support for their political campaigns.

This manipulation is clear to not only those trying to protect libraries, but is also an accepted tactic by those within the movement. As an incoming Republican State Senator for West Virginia, Jay Taylor, said to those who were also seeking to ban certain books and titles, "You gotta be careful, because as soon as you try to ban something, you're declared racist or whatever and all that stuff. We'd be torched if — we can't do book banning. It's gotta be about 'age appropriate'" (Karbball, 2022, n.p.). Right-wing extremists' focus on alternative

messaging – whether it is a call to values, parents' rights, neoliberalism, or other principles – simply provides the kind of reasoning and rhetorical cover that will allow censorship to flourish in a society where, even those in favor of censorship admit, it remains deeply unpopular (Public Religion Research Institute, 2022).

Pro-Censorship Movements are Anything but Grassroots

Though each individual utterance, speech, or social media post from a politician, activist, or concerned parent may not on their own indicate larger social forces at play, analyzing the pattern and tenor of these kinds of statements illuminates the coordinated and intentional rhetorical moves of those inside this political coalition. Indeed, even slightly bizarre arguments like those that liken censorship to “turning off” books that are not appropriate are a clear example of right wing speakers calling for the state to assume a parental role while trusting neoliberal “free market” solutions more than libraries and public institutions (Jaeger et al., in press; Tripodi, 2023).

While many of the activists and groups involved may seek to portray themselves as only recently concerned citizens and parents, it would be unwise to take those claims at face value. This represents a national movement of right-wing extremists with populist and fascist motivations attempting to redefine fundamental principles of American democratic institutions.

As we see in the ever-growing list of book-banning coalitions in communities across the country, “when a reactionary groundswell in any given municipality, school district or state issues calls to ban specific books... the merging of neoliberal ideas with populist rationality accords dangerous legitimacy to what are, in fact, fascist acts of erasure” (Slater, 2022, n.p.). Erasure is exactly the point for this movement. Of all the values and ideologies called up by those in the pro-censorship movement, the strongest impulse by far is the one that seeks to exclude specific groups from our public discourse and educational spheres.

Social Exclusion and Undermining Access are the Goals

Each pro-censorship speaker is using very particular rhetorical moves, and signaling their insider status in a reactionary community that values upholding the status quo at all costs, so as to not allow room for any progressive ideas of moving additional voices into the American mainstream. Fundamentally, this political network does not seek to ban a few books, or even a set of viewpoints; instead, they seek to dismantle the public sphere, particularly where it preserves the rights of communities minoritized within American society (Buschman, 2020). As libraries have played a strong – although sometimes arguably theoretical – role in the upholding of the ideals of American democratic values, this new movement is intentionally targeting them as a means of limiting access to alternative viewpoints and narratives that may undermine their narrow understanding of the American project (Mercieca, 2023; Stanley, 2018).

These right-wing extremist's attempt to hold on to a mythological, romanticized vision of the American past shows its fascist leanings as well as its growing fear of “cultural displacement” (Stanley, 2018, Tripodi, 2022). In fact, “understanding this fear of cultural displacement is particularly important when it comes to circumventing political propaganda,” and indeed incendiary statements about books and libraries are at their core

propaganda (Tripodi, 2022, p. 27). The right spins up smaller fears into larger threats, “repeating these narratives over and over again legitimiz[ing] the idea that whites are dispossessed, despite their retaining an overwhelming majority of powerful positions and land wealth in the United States” (Tripodi, 2022, p. 27).

As some ongoing educational, collection development, and professional development initiatives within the field may signal a strong commitment to social justice, the “overwhelming majority” of library infrastructure still upholds the cultural hegemony and, therefore, fears of new policies displacing the supremacy of majoritarian views in libraries are not rooted in reality. Instead, these activists are seeking to turn back any social progress they see, such as attempts at cultural inclusion in schools and libraries. As United States Representative Cory Mills from Florida said on Twitter, on February 9, 2023: “The battlefield for the future of our society is being fought within the classrooms of American schools” (Mills, 2023). His view is reflective of others in the movement who seek to undermine the legitimacy of public institutions as a means of limiting the perspectives of future voters and engaged citizens (Mercieca, 2023; Stanley, 2018). Schools, libraries, and books continue to be a threat, even in the age of smartphones, to those seeking to uphold right-wing extremist positions on exactly who deserves to have their voice heard in American society.

Library Advocacy Efforts Merit Reconsideration

Libraries and library workers who become bogged down in the details of each particular title, challenge, or threat, though well-meaning, are missing the forest for the trees. As public libraries are perhaps the only institutions that are truly open to the entire public in the United States, they are uniquely at risk in this moment of rhetorical, political, and cultural disruption. The risk here is not just one of ineffective political advocacy. There is a clear risk that by engaging the merits of these arguments, library advocates tacitly normalize these kinds of movements and actions. All the well-intentioned toolkits and suggestions to read the challenged material in order to respond point-by-point, risk missing the true threat entirely. Library organizations large and small need to take the time to understand the political nature of these constitutive rhetorics. Ultimately, “trying to avoid being politically engaged, even under the cover of “neutrality,” actively hurts libraries, as we are silent about or unprepared to deal with many of the political issues that directly impact our institutions” (Jaeger & Sarin, 2016, p. 23). While it was certainly unwise to claim to be outside the political sphere during past censorship challenges, financial strains, and other attempts to undermine the profession, to do so now would all but guarantee failure for library advocates. Our communities deserve better than lukewarm calls to outdated and fictitious ideas like neutrality (Cooke et al., 2022).

More Analysis is Needed for Effective Political Advocacy Strategies

Across the country, book banners are building and reaffirming imagined communities and identities through their use of this kind of rhetorical “identification” (Cowan, 2021, p.195). Those on the other side of the conflict would be wise to engage in the kind of discursive practices that will allow them to build a socially positive rhetorical situation for

libraries writ large (Cowan, 2021). By developing our own clear and effective messaging for library advocates, we will not only rise to meet the rhetoric challenges of this extraordinarily violent and reactionary social movement, but we will also honor the people and communities we serve. To do anything less is to risk normalizing the debate around censorship and normalizing public debate over the lived experiences of minoritized communities already targeted by right-wing extremists.

Practically, library and educational advocates' messaging, rhetorics, and languages must evolve to meet these challenges, and to provide a clear path forward for all seeking to defend our institutions. A critical engagement with the rhetoric of politics, and the "concrete ways public speech practically assembles meaning," as much as with financial and legal implications of policy, is essential for the survival of all libraries (Martin, 2022, p.182).

Now is the time to devote resources to the analysis of how the rhetorical and political frameworks used by libraries have provided much of the ammunition of these current attacks and challenges. By striving to communicate in ways that would placate the whims of neoliberal forces, libraries have undermined their value and standing in the political sphere, and yet still lack clear and universal alternative rhetorical strategies.

Libraries as an institution may not be able to survive these kinds of prolonged and overwhelming attacks if there remains a rigid adherence to internal ideological purity in our public political communication, instead of adapting our messages to meet the demands of modern politics. That rigidity, and an unwillingness to communicate in ways that will be most heard by the broader community, only removes vital potential instruments from the toolbox of library political advocates. Libraries can still accomplish their mission and align actions with values, while speaking externally in ways that are proven to be most effective. Taking the time to analyze and confront the challenges of internal and external rhetorics is one way academics can support the work of library advocates across the country.

A Call to Rhetorical Arms

"The goal is to disrupt, critique, and expose anti-democratic communication to diminish its power and effectiveness" (Mercieca, 2023, n.p.).

In the immediate term, library advocates and organizations must move away from debate and dialogue about specific challenges and move towards a political communication strategy that actively disrupts openly anti-democratic censorship movements. Libraries, schools and other public institutions absolutely cannot rest on historical notions of neutrality when those seeking to manipulate public opinion are operating with openly fascist intentions.

In fact, "it is only by recognizing education's [and libraries'] inherently political nature that societies can imbue it with democratic force and, in turn, cultivate the agency of populations to act transformatively" (Slater, 2022, n.p.). Broad and sweeping public support for libraries has been affirmed by public opinion surveys time and time again (Horrigan, 2016; Public Religion Research Institute, 2022). Now is the time to engage in our own forms of rhetorical imaginary (i.e. how a culture imagines the role, function, features, norms, and values of communication) in order to harness that support and serve the public good (Cowan, 2021).

We cannot wait. We cannot rely on outdated norms of neutrality and nonengagement. Collectively, library workers need to build our own base of rhetorical power to protect that which we hold so dear. The work of libraries is essential, not just for our democracy — but the people we serve. It is time to tell our stories in ways that will resonate with not just our super supporters, but with each and every person within the United States.

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