

Gender, Politics, and The Public Library: How Polarization and Feminization Conspired to Destabilize One of “The Most Trusted Professions”

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ABSTRACT

On January 24th, 2025, not one week into the new administration the United States Department of Education Office of Civil rights issued a statement that it was dismissing all investigations related to book bans, calling the investigations a “hoax.” The Trump nominated Acting Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights, Craig Trainor described this as “restoring the fundamental rights of parents to direct their children’s education,” which is the fullest expression so far that we have seen in the public sphere of the rhetorical dominance of ideas like “parent’s rights” being weaponized to subvert information access and undermine libraries across the country (*U.S. Department of Education Ends Biden’s Book Ban Hoax | U.S. Department of Education, 2025, Jennings-Roche, 2023*).

While this is very obviously just the opening salvo in wide scale dismantling of civil rights protections for librarians, teachers, and the communities they serve—a reckoning within the library world is long overdue. Neutrality, or half-hearted approximations of it, has never been an effective advocacy strategy nor has it ever reflected the true work being done by librarians across the country. By ignoring the shifting political contexts outside our library doors while underpreparing library workers for the reality of community-engaged work, librarianship, writ large has not only failed to meet the moment but allowed neo-liberal and reactionary political forces to openly undermine the public’s trust in libraries for decades with little resistance (Jaeger & Sarin, 2016; Durney, 2023).

The “self-imposed voicelessness of libraries” has long been highlighted by a small subsection of LIS scholars and roundly ignored by our larger organizations in favor of comfortable, often “cute” branding campaigns that assert value while failing to demonstrate the material or political value of our institutions in the minds of those who set policy agendas (Jaeger et al., 2013, p. 372). Much like the valorization of all other types of “women’s work” in the public sphere (to loosely quote EveryLibrary’s John Chrastka): everyone loves libraries, but no one cares.

Non-partisan does not have to mean non-political. Libraries, by their very nature, are political.

People and communities have engaged in public life to advocate for their own interests, needs, and ideals since before the founding of modern nationstates. The idea that the state, or any collective governing body, should be responsive to the demands of those living there is well established to the point of being taken for granted in modern democracies, though that assumption is currently shifting in the many democracies that are taking a strongly nationalist turn, including the US.

With the entrenchment of the modern two-party dominated political system, conversations attempting to define the limits and parameters of caring for our neighbors and our communities became polarized along party lines. This party alignment is what defines the distinction between political causes and partisan ones, partisanship is concerned with promoting one party or politician, whereas politics is just the method by which resources are allocated in the public sphere. While specific party alignment on each issue can often fluctuate community by community, the past few years in American political discourse have become defined by extreme forms of cultural backlash and polarization (Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Stanley, 2018).

Contending with the impact of this polarization is increasingly difficult for library advocates as the field has never had a strong grasp on the distinctions between “political” and “partisan.” While partisanship may mean support of a particular party or candidate, “political” engagement within LIS can often be painted with a sweeping brush that glosses over the very real needs of our communities in favor of neutrality and non-engagement. Until librarians can comfortably contend with traditional forms of political discourse and engagement, we will never be able to fully navigate the treacherous waters of extreme polarization that defines the American political, and the partisan, sphere in 2025.

Cultural backlash

Traditionally, political party alignment within the United States was broadly defined along an incredibly centrist left-right axis, with Republicans favoring small government, financial individualism, and often Christian faith-based issues, and Democrats supporting issues related to collective social welfare and individual moral judgments and expression. Often these lines would be drawn between the professional white-collar class (Republican) and the blue-collar working class (Democrats), largely influenced by educational and wealth based disparities as well as distinctions between suburban and urban communities.

What we have seen in the past decade in the United States is in some ways an inversion of the traditional alignment along party lines. We see those working in the skilled trades, who historically strongly voted Democratic due to the party’s support of strong labor unions, have turned to the Republican party due to its stance on various social issues. Higher education has ceased being a respectable bastion of conservative early adulthood that once served to reproduce class status, and instead, is now viewed with extreme skepticism from those in right-wing information spheres.

Attacks on libraries, schools, and universities are not surprising given the nature of the far-right’s ongoing work to delegitimize expertise, the public sphere, and communities that oppose their revision of American history in favor of creating a new national mythos (Stanley, 2018, 2024). Intentionally undermining public trust in educational institutions and scholars

is a keystone of authoritarian regimes throughout history, as scholars are often the first and loudest voices willing to stand in the way of social and political repression (Stanley, 2018). Libraries and librarians, while targets in their own right, are also included in the push to silence free-thought and dissenting voices.

Complimenting the social delegitimization of scholars, teachers, and librarians are the gendered perceptions and dynamics of each of these fields. While K-12 education has nearly always been considered the province of women, higher education had up until very recently been valued as a traditionally masculine profession, a fact which is still borne out when looking at the numbers of tenured professors in the US . However, educational attainment has evolved and women are now outpacing men in nearly all levels of higher education. The very idea of a college degree has become feminized and pink washed, where being a student or a professor has been branded as markedly feminine in many right-wing discourse spheres and communities (Mireles, 2020; Hoff, 2024). This is not a mere coincidence or an accident of changing social conditions. Instead we can see how the regression of women's rights, and respect for women's contributions to society, is playing out in real time as bulwarks of respectable masculinity are transformed in the minds of the American public into something that is shameful for real American men to openly pursue (Davis, 2024).

Women, education, and politics

Politics, as a part of the public sphere, has long been considered the province of men; women were relegated to the domestic sphere and to highly specific, and feminized roles, in the public. Despite clear advances in women's educational and career attainment, the discrepancies between whose voices are respected, uplifted, and taken seriously persist between the public and the private, with gaps widening, even in places where women's participation has risen (Acker, 1990; Ozer, 2023). We can see this disconnection, such that even when controlling for variables like marriage, education, and income women are less likely to participate in partisan politics and public campaigns and are more likely to participate in civic life in ways that are less institutional (Coffé & Bolzendahl, 2010).

As we think about the perceived gender roles of various public service professionals, we can easily see some of the consequences of this disparity when looking at the effectiveness of advocacy for classes of workers that are viewed as traditionally masculine versus those that are coded as feminine. Blue collar public servants, like firefighters and police officers, are valorized AND rewarded with material support for their needs and working conditions (Barnes et al., 2021). Whereas pink collar public servants, like librarians and teachers, are rhetorically patted on the head while the stability of labor conditions erode beneath their feet. This is not new, and studies have been done about how the gendered social expectations of teachers and even social workers undermine their practical concerns in the workplace (Puzio & Valshtein, 2022). Librarianship is one more example of the renewed social devaluation of women's work and expertise in the United States.

Relatedly, because women have been outpacing men in higher educational attainment - in combination with the increased attainment of racialized minorities - the very value of a college degree has been degraded. This is unquestionably also tied to the general undercurrent of "anti-intellectualism in American life," but it is also a reflection of how ideas around gender can transform the perceived value of something that was previously considered an unquestioned cultural and social good (Hofstadter, 1966).

The backlash of anti-feminist, ultimately anti-women's, participation in public life, cannot be ignored when considering the challenges of defending and advocating for libraries and librarians in the political sphere. Librarianship is both a pink-collar field, and a field that, by and large, requires the attainment of not only a college degree, but a graduate one. The push for de-professionalization, and the recurrent attempts to undermine the value of the MLIS degree itself, go hand in hand with the objectives of the right-wing, antidemocratic movements that seek to weaken the foundations of our informational and educational institutions (Berry, 2017).

In a profession dominated by women, 82.4% of the workforce was made up of women as of 2017, cultural conditioning that inhibits political engagement, as well as outside forces that delegitimize the expertise of the professionals in the field, have all coalesced in ways that threaten the very idea of public, and professional, librarianship (*Librarians | Data USA*, n.d.).

Gendered pillars of these problems in libraries

Librarians are routinely and uncritically feminized in both self-perception and external portrayals, from overly "cute" portrayals of professionals in pop culture to the overheated rhetoric of right-wing politicians, it is impossible to separate the idea of the "librarian" from ideas of womanhood in American society. We know that the expertise of women in politics is taken less seriously no matter their level of involvement and yet, as a field librarianship has not taken the time to grapple with this reality, let alone to untangle to historic and pernicious ideas of "Lady Bountiful" from our self-perceptions and outward facing personas (Ozer, 2023).

Historically, librarians have explicitly defined their role in society as one of "guardians of the public morality" and even sought to control and curate access to materials in ways that would uphold whatever the perceived moral standard of the time (Parker, 1997, p.76). Librarians fought to define their legitimacy in the public sphere and in doing so often imagined themselves in opposition to other feminized professionals, like teachers (Parker, 1997). The freedom fighter archetype, a librarian that is committed to protecting patron privacy and freedom to read, is a relatively recent invention and not a concept that reflects the historic reality or the everyday working conditions of librarians (Albanese, 2023; Parker, 1997).

Many working librarians today may gesture towards ideas of intellectual freedom, but the profession and our communal norms have not moved too far afield from the guardian/guide/mother/cultivator ideal entrenched at the very outset of professionalization in the United States (Parker, 1997). Neutrality may have replaced benevolence in our self-identification, but the concept itself is not nearly as transformational as it seems based on the plain meaning of the word.

When examining the politically harmful, yet pervasive, concept of neutrality it is essential to place it in relationship with the legacy of "Lady Bountiful" and the civilizing impulses undergirding the foundations of librarianship (Parker, 1997; Schlesselman-Tarango, 2016, 2017). We can look to historical examples of how "nice white women" sought to modify the world-views of immigrants, racial minorities, and lower-class people by cultivating collections, and subtly educating those communities on the norms of the majority culture (Parker, 1997). White women were often the standard bearers of dominant culture, offering soft forms of domination through books, lessons, and social shunning for those who stepped out of line (Parker, 1997). The veneer of respectability, like neutrality, allowed for this kind of

subtle control to be wielded in service of larger cultural and political aims (Maack, 1982; Watson, 1994, 1996).

Neutrality, vocational awe, and gender performance

Neutrality itself, once thought to be a pillar of librarian ethical theory, has been proven to be a tool by which dominant cultures uphold their own perspectives and ignore those that make the “majority” uncomfortable (Gibson, et. al. 2017), and yet, little work has been done to trace the impacts of gender on the idea of the library in larger political consciousness.

In a similar vein, vocational awe (the modern expression of the civilizing, white savior visions of lady bountiful), continues to oppress library workers by encouraging them to sublimate their perspectives, needs, and voices in favor of “serving” their communities (Ettarh, 2018). Librarians are expected to sublimate their own perspectives and even bodily and emotional needs in the workplace in order to represent an idealized version of the modern librarian/savior, the idea of librarianship being anything less than calling is anathema to those who would like to preserve this self-identity. The pressures of vocational awe can be pernicious and hard to escape with more established librarians exerting implicit and explicit pressures on newer library workers, with evidence that female librarians are more likely to exert this gendered pressure on their peers.

Vocational awe itself is a form of gender performance, a mode by which librarians not only undermine their political effectiveness, but ultimately participate in the kind of “self-objectification” that has come to modern, regressive notions of womanhood (Traister, 2024). To this way of thinking, a woman's highest calling is care and motherhood, and what better way to demonstrate excellence in care work than by being all things to all people and rising to meet the demands of all community members, while never clearly advocating policy positions or exerting pressure on legislators (Jabour, 2021).

At a national scale, library advocates often - and correctly! - place the blame for the modern challenges facing the profession and our communities on the far-right extremists seeking to dismantle the public sphere, however it cannot be denied that we undermine our own legitimacy and expertise when we double down on our own feminization by acting like we, librarians writ large, do not have clear and defined political positions. Instead of claiming our power, and describing our impact in civil society, we rely on weak tropes and unsupported assertions of our value in a democracy.

Value demonstration vs value assertion - What do we actually do and what impact does it have?

Scholars in library information studies have argued for over a decade that librarianship has been hobbled in the public sphere when it attempts to assert the value of our libraries instead of demonstrating value in a way that resonates with policy makers (Jaeger et al., 2013, 2017; Jaeger, Jennings-Roche, & Hodge, 2023; Jaeger, Jennings-Roche, Taylor, et al., 2023) . Assertions of the critical role that libraries play in supporting a healthy and functional democracy are repeated ad infinitum while few librarians or advocates are able to define what that actually means, or by what mechanism libraries advance the aims of a more democratic society (Popowich, 2019; Buschman, 2024). We have some strong professional intuitions that we could possibly tie things like library card holder numbers to objectives like voter turnout and how increased connectivity can increase labor participation in a few specific case studies. But,

what we as a profession do not have is a clearly identified democratic role in the minds of the public or even in the minds of library workers themselves (Popowich, 2019). It is all well and good to say we support information access and democratic engagement, but until lawmakers can recite back to us the exact mechanism by which that happens, our self-aggrandizing slogans will continue to come up short in the face of overwhelming rhetorical, political, and legal assaults (Jaeger, 2024; Jennings-Roche, 2023).

Instead of focusing our collective energy on effective message discipline, or even intentional political campaigns, librarians have instead returned to the impulses of Lady Bountiful, “guardians of public morals,” and white saviorshood. While the world outside our hallowed halls has rapidly polarized, librarians have convinced themselves that by narrowing the parameters of what makes a “good librarian” we may somehow “save” our communities from their lack of proper social justice values/language (Crowley, 2023b, 2023a). Librarians film themselves on right-wing social media burning books they disagree with, or make public statements that paint a target on the backs of their colleagues in red areas, and sometimes even push for events and programming without the proper plans in place to keep presenters and attendees physically and emotionally safe. Up and coming library workers see these performances and may build an identity around being “radical librarians” without having done the work of understanding what community organizing and safety plans look like in real life and without considering how to approach these topics in their own local contexts (Crowley, 2023b, 2023a).

Through this collective identity formation around what makes a “good” librarian, library workers can lose sight of the public nature of our jobs. While political opinions are good and should always be respected, losing sight of how libraries actually operate in the public sphere, often as institutions wholly or partially funded and overseen by local government, will only harm our ability to collectively advocate for our libraries, peers, and communities.

While educating ourselves, and advocating for inclusion at every turn, is absolutely at the core of good librarianship and community service, the idea that every form of public facing library communication must rise to the narrow, and constantly evolving, rhetoric of college-educated, and often highly-urbanized social justice discourse is remarkably misguided. The right-wing has done such an incredible job of setting the rules of the rhetorical game that there is genuinely no way for the zero point seven percent of the American population that is a library worker to completely reeducate on topics like “critical race theory,” even if we assumed that every librarian agreed with the principles of the theory.

The concepts, precepts, and principles demonstrated by Kimberlee Crenshaw and others are inarguable, but when it comes to public opinion working librarians are unlikely to shift the right-wing interpretations of that language and no one fight over academic language is more important than meeting the needs of our communities and finding ways to materially redress historic harms and inequalities (Patin et al., 2021). Much the same argument can be made for any number of progressive causes and ideas. The American public largely supports the progressive policies when they are described on their merits, but reject them when they are called by the names that have become politically charged (ie. Obamacare). The polarized and extremely partisan rhetoric that dominates right-wing media outlets has transformed reasonable policy positions on any number of issues into threats in the minds of their audiences.

Fixing the disconnect between policy and rhetoric is unbelievably important work, but it is not the work of the library. The library exists to be responsive to the needs of our communities, provide access to all forms of information, serve as democratic forums for education and speech, and offer third spaces for communal connection. When we lose sight of that and

jump on the trends that will make us momentarily “library-famous” (for better or for worse), we damage more than just our personal reputations or that of the library we work for.

This impulse to “educate” about social justice can be viewed as the enduring legacy of lady bountiful and cultural moralization, and is ultimately a new form of self-objectification that defines the field along the lines of vocational awe. Library workers have become so enamored with the idea of portraying the “righteous warrior” librarian that we have begun to lose the ability to offer the core functions of the library. Librarianship is not ministry and unlike most religious institutions, librarians offer access to all, no matter what beliefs are in their hearts. We don’t need to convert, evangelize, or morally instruct, we need to serve the people in front of us, everyday.

Performing librarianship

The increasingly narrow parameters of what it means to be good at “performing” the identity of librarian—one who has perfected the mores a specific kind of urban, educated, progressive class orientation—has served to not only alienate many in our communities who may share our values but not our language, but also to undermine our ability to build coalitions that could advocate for larger political wins. Performativity in pink collar, and otherwise feminized forms of labor, often encourages women to focus on the boundaries of their righteousness rather than the shared goals and principles that could lead to the kind of solidarity needed to advance the interests of their communities. We can see ideas of what defines the “ideal mother” can shift from micro-community to micro-community, perhaps defined by religious expression or food choices in one or limits on screen time and gender neutral clothing in others, but what none of these definitions offer is the kind of public sphere challenging engagement that might make society better for mothers and their children (Bryant & Marin Hellwege, 2019; Jill Greenlee, 2014; Modigliani, 1986; Watson, 1994). This focus on private value demonstration where we define success by the measure of those “in the know” in whatever way that means for our various communities - the hippest librarians, most virtuous mothers, revolutionary teachers - distracts from the kind of big-tent pluralistic coalition building that would be necessary to fundamentally redefine the value of that kind of labor in the minds of policy makers.

Performativity at the expense of coalition building may have been relatively harmless in the past—despite Bertot, Buschman, Gorham, Jaeger, Taylor, Kranich, Meera, and others warning about the collapse of our collective political status for decades—but in the current moment it is a poison pill that only serves those seeking to undermine libraries and the public sphere (Buschman, 2022, 2023, 2024). Librarians and advocates have defaulted to perfecting our insider language and definitions and passing self-imposed purity tests, while allowing others to define our value to civil society. All of those internal conversations/trainings/articles/workshops/etc are valuable and important, but the reluctance to take up space rhetorically and politically by communicating in ways that will appeal to the broadest base possible is perhaps the most harmful outcome of the inward turn in librarianship.

Inter vs. intra communal communication

We can see the disconnect between inter-librarian language and effective political communication in the data collected by various groups in recent years. The drums we, librarians, keep beating around performative social justice and ideological change have crashed into

the reality of the political sphere that has long been dominated by reactionary right-wing, and in the best of times, rhetorically center-right to moderate ideological frames. Frame-warfare has been waged for so long, and with such success, it will likely take many years and a ton of concerted effort to reclaim certain words and phrases from the ideological morass they have become mired in the minds of the American public (Mercieca, 2019).

Again, shifting the discourse is important work, but not the work of librarians. We need to use the tools and data currently at our disposal to defend, buttress, and advocate for our values and our communities across the country. Certain terms have become politicized to the point of being actively harmful to effective communication, and we as librarians are not in a position to “civilize” society into the viewpoint that we want them to share, instead we can find rhetoric and communication strategies that appeal to both the general public and policy makers alike (Lakoff, 2014; Mercieca, 2019; Schlesselman-Tarango, 2016a, 2016b).

Politics have shifted rapidly and library advocates must understand that the far-right has shown its strength in manipulating jargon against us. Until/unless we have our own propagandists we must be honest with ourselves and rely on the things we actually do when communicating with the public. We can see evidence of this in the data collected for EveryLibrary in 2022, where “arguing that proponents are simply scared of anyone different is least convincing,” and even “centering our arguments or key points in the areas of sex/lgbtq+/gender/race will activate support for book banning while weakening most peoples’ general impulse to NOT ban books” (EveryLibrary Institute, 2024). While it is inarguable that books on those topics are essential to our communities, library messaging does not need to focus on that, and instead find ways to demonstrate value and activate support by aligning our messaging around ideas of freedom of speech, access, community engaged collections, and the First Amendment—widely accepted ideals which may have a high chance of success.

Librarians need to avoid slipping into lady bountiful type frameworks, even when it seems like those frameworks are the best way to uphold the values many joined the profession to uphold, like equity, access, and inclusion. In political communication, attempting to moralize or change the perspectives of the general public is not our job—our job is to provide access for all and wherever possible to encourage self-education and critical thinking. Feminized norms around engagement and private sphere advocacy at the expense of public sphere engagement are likely at least part of the root of our over-reliance on ideological purity over collective political engagement, but it does not need to define our political communication moving forward.

Libraries will always be political.

Although libraries have always been and will always be a part of the political sphere within the United States, this does not mean that advocating for collections, funding, staffing, or our communities is partisan. Many librarians themselves of course have strongly held political, and even partisan, viewpoints, but that does not mean that our very institutions or services are defined as such. In a functioning democracy public servants are allowed to have and express private political opinions while the institutions they serve remain resolutely non-partisan. Libraries serve every person who walks through their door or accesses their resources. Party affiliation, voting record and the like have no bearing on the level or quality of service, just like all public and/or governmental institutions serve the American public. The far-right wants the American public to forget that libraries serve them too, and we cannot let them continue to define our mission in the minds of the public we serve. By continuing

old, gendered patterns around communication, moralization, and self-identity, we weaken the foundations of the institutions we cherish and allow the far-right to exploit those weaknesses to serve their exclusionary and anti-democratic interests.

If we can't face it, we can never fix it.

“Frame warfare” as so eloquently described by scholars like George Lakoff and Jennifer Mercieca, illuminates the nature of our current political environment, and the threats posed by the far-right cannot be underestimated (Lakoff, 2014; Mercieca, 2023). Unfortunately, not all material and rhetorical threats can be laid squarely at the feet of library opponents. Librarianship itself has remained steadfastly unprepared for the current political moment and in many ways our self-identity and communication norms have contributed to that lack of preparations.

When it comes to frame warfare, it is essential that we do the work and tell whatever stories that let us keep doing it. Letting go of rhetorical and ideological purity in the face of overwhelming threats is the only path forward for the field. By unpacking the legacy of gender on self-perceptions and the public profile of librarians, we can perhaps develop new tools and frameworks that allow for effective political advocacy in the public sphere while not losing sight of our core values. The way we talk about things in our external messaging and political actions does not need to directly align with our current internal social justice frameworks. Those are important, but not useful for broad political messaging. The world should absolutely change and bend towards justice for all, but in the meantime, we need to communicate effectively the political reality that currently defines nearly all mainstream discourse spheres (Jennings-Roche, 2023, Lakoff, 2014, EveryLibrary Institute 2024).

Sadly, little of our internal growth as information professionals will matter if all librarians quit or are fired; and ideological purity in the face of criminalization, job losses, and closed doors is handing our opponents even more tools to dismantle our libraries. By the very nature of the work and our shared values, librarianship draws in workers who are eager to increase access to information and to help people, however historical legacies and frameworks like neutrality, vocational awe, and feminization often subvert that work. Librarians would be better served by rhetorics and political engagement that supports their role in the public sphere.

We can still accomplish the mission and align our actions to our values while speaking the language voters and community members respond to positively. But to do so we need to reckon with our past, unpack the pernicious forms of gendered expectations and ideologies that pervade our professional norms, and work together to build coalitions, draw in allies, and protect ourselves. It is going to be a long, uphill battle, but we can persevere with the right friends and the right tools.

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