

# On Moving Forward

LIBRATOR

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## ABSTRACT

The author examines likely scenarios pertaining to the world of librarianship that may arise from the incoming administration. They call for a retrenchment in values-based librarianship, examine what those values are, and encourage introspection among library professionals. The article closes with a series of recommendations for all levels of librarianship to meet the potential shocks the field will face in the years ahead, emphasizing the importance of solidarity.

*“Hoping for the best, prepared for the worst, and unsurprised by anything in between.”—Maya Angelou*

Anyone serving as a public librarian exists within the Venn circles of their personal values, our professional values, and the values supported by a majority of the community. There is room there, certainly, for a public library to succeed, but it can be much more difficult in some areas than others. Indeed, in a rural community that votes consistently red—an outlier in an otherwise blue state—it can be like walking a tightrope. A small rural community affords massive potential for valuable interpersonal and professional relationships, fruitful partnerships, and an overall much greater impact from its library, and I am very proud of what my team and I have accomplished here. It also, however, involves the ever-present threat of alienating the wrong people and becoming *persona non grata*—endangering the institution, whose face you are, in the bargain.

In this atmosphere, recruiting new board members is always a stressful prospect. I find myself wondering about the motivations of the people interested in the role: Are they here to help or to undermine our efforts? Do they genuinely care about things like open access and intellectual freedom, or do they have an axe to grind?

I am fortunate to have a board that is largely in step with library values and a generally supportive local government that views the library as a partner and conduit to the community. Stories abound of rural jurisdictions that have neither and the nightmare scenarios they have to face: political hijackings of key positions, defunding, harassment by reactionary groups, threats, vandalism, and much more. In this area, one neighboring jurisdiction is volunteer-run, another is facing painful cuts and potential closures, and others exist on the margins and scrounge materials as best they can.

The fact that my area voted for Donald Trump in 2024, while immensely disheartening, was not even remotely a surprise. Locally, support for Trump is taken as a given in conversation—flags and signs abound in varying degrees of tastefulness (“God, Guns, Trump”

being a favorite), and MAGA hats and shirts proliferate. Ultimately, this election saw 75 percent of the community vote to elect a man who cares nothing for their well-being, only for their fealty.

## Through A Glass, Darkly

*"If you can't dazzle them with brilliance, baffle them with bullshit." -W.C. Fields*

And now, here we are. An ignorant, venal, vindictive authoritarian was chosen to lead us in a free and fair election, and the saints, the sinners, and everyone in between have to reckon with the consequences. It seems likely that anyone not primed to join the new oligarchy will suffer for their benefit and that the haves and the have-nots will continue to drift further apart, with certain groups scapegoated as un-American to redirect anger away from the abuses of the new Gilded Age's robber barons.

Since the inauguration, the new administration has already launched a blizzard of executive orders ranging from the poorly thought out to the blatantly unconstitutional, effectively flooding the media, public, and government with an unbalancing wave of fiat government designed to overwhelm both comprehension and resistance. While legal challenges strike at one power grab in the courts (themselves effectively subverted), twenty more will have been released in the meantime so that each has to make its way through the system. How effective this "flood-the-zone" approach will be in the long run remains to be seen, but without meaningful and coordinated opposition—which this is specifically designed to frustrate—anything is possible.

Of course, even the best of us can only hazard a guess as to what the future might hold in this environment for libraries, as well as the country. I think the following, however, are very likely possibilities:

- Heritage Foundation judges taking on First Amendment cases will be less willing to uphold the freedom to read and free speech rights. Challenges to library materials and programs could succeed, and more materials, particularly on LGBTQ+ subjects, could be declared obscene—the protections of the First Amendment cannot be taken for granted. The Foundation's Project 2025, the authors of which are being placed into power, equates materials on "transgender ideology" with pornography and says that "educators and public librarians who purvey it should be classed as registered sex offenders." This is listed in that document as "Promise #1."
- In such an atmosphere, threats to libraries and staff will likely increase. There will be pressure to ramp up security without additional resources, and costs associated with a largely theatrical security presence will cut into the ability of libraries to fulfill patron needs, further undermining their value.
- The American Library Association, which already faces serious funding issues thanks in part to forced divestments for politically motivated reasons, will continue to find itself under attack for perceived radicalism by genuine radicals. ALA has already done itself no favors with its poor communication around these issues, which have alienated many in the divisions and round tables. Without the goodwill of its members and the perception that the organization is fighting for librar-

ies' fundamental values in a meaningful way, participation and, by extension, funding will further decrease.

- IMLS and LSTA are almost certain to be cut—their funding has been under threat for years, and the “slash-and-burn” attitude of the incoming administration already proposes to eliminate much bigger agencies than them. While this will not in and of itself close libraries, it will eliminate a major funding source for innovation and force state libraries to reshuffle and reprioritize the support they are able to offer. And state libraries will be dealing with challenges of their own—as of this writing, South Dakota proposes to eliminate theirs entirely, with more red states potentially following suit.
- The Internet Archive, one of the few remaining institutions online that share our mission and values, will find itself fending off constant legal challenges (and DDoS attacks) and possible injunctions from a hostile judiciary. Further legal loss in the pending suit brought by major music labels could result in literally ruinous penalties, as well as a redefinition of fair use that further empowers private rights holders over the public good.
- News media will divide into three major groups: the complicit, the cowed, and the largely irrelevant Cassandra screaming into the void. AI-generated slop will make up an increasing percentage of articles as the field of professional journalism continues to shrink correspondingly. Meanwhile, grassroots efforts on social media will try to pick up the slack, though how much success they will have operating under billionaire platform owners and wading through a morass of propaganda remains to be seen. The effect of all this will be to further delegitimize mainstream sources of information and cause people to coalesce around the bubbles that appeal to their biases, hampering the solidarity needed for change.
- DEI efforts will increasingly be met unsympathetically, if not with open hostility, as a form of “reverse racism” designed to disempower whites. Federal efforts have already been shut down by executive order. The protections granted by the Fourteenth Amendment are already being directly challenged by executive fiat, and standing up for the hard-won civil rights many of us take for granted in modern society will be ever harder and ever more critical.
- Social media will continue to become ever more toxic, exploitative, and subject to algorithmic manipulation. The government will seek additional controls over content and continue to monitor citizens' activity in increasingly chilling ways. Free speech questions in ostensibly private platforms that nevertheless serve as new “public” fora will prioritize the overlapping private and political interests that represent the new ruling class.
- The administration has already indicated its willingness to permit ICE raids in schools, churches, and hospitals. Libraries could very well be caught up in the middle of anti-immigrant sweeps as well, and staff will need to know what to do in such an event, especially as an executive order has stated that any officials interfering with ICE will themselves be prosecuted.
- The cry for “government efficiency” and pressure from the investor class will drive a push for the dismantling and/or privatization of public goods. Libraries will not be exempt from this, especially considering that the class of people push-

ing for such privatization are largely disconnected from the population that uses the library and will not necessarily recognize or sympathize with the value libraries provide them. Culture war issues, as described above, will be stoked as needed to make an emotionally based case for defunding.

- Ham-fisted, speculative, and self-serving economic moves made for the benefit of the investor class will lead to likely recession, resulting in budget cuts, layoffs, and closures. Government positions and the funding that supported them will be eliminated, and that, combined with the accelerating dehumanization of the workforce thanks to artificial intelligence, will result in remaining library staff assisting more patrons with unemployment-related issues.
- The disparity in educational opportunities between rich and poor communities will increase further as federal money dries up and states are left to fend for themselves. Early childhood education and education for students with special needs will be particularly hard-hit. Parents with the means will gravitate toward private options as public schooling withers on the vine, assisted by voucher programs designed to expedite that process. Poorer states will see significant educational hardship, and free access to reputable educational resources will become more critical.

## Whither Libraries?

First, an important question.

What drew you to librarianship? A love of books and reading? Helping others? A particularly engaging program? The prospect of being able to make a difference to people? For some of us, librarianship is a job, but for many, it is a calling—to the point that vocational awe is a real problem in this profession that can turn toxic and impact our emotional well-being. What causes this passion for our profession—and why is it common among both staff and patrons?

I would argue that a large part of it is the values we traditionally represent in the library world. By defining and promoting those values in our communities, we can guide each other through dark times. People and institutions that visibly stand for something and remain steadfast are, after all, in short supply and are all the more remarkable when found.

Values-based librarianship is vital now. Solidarity around our mission, role in society, and partners that share that mission is essential—it is the source of the infectious passion that libraries can inculcate.

The ALA has its own Core Values of Librarianship statement, of course, which identifies five values: access, equity, intellectual freedom and privacy, public good, and sustainability (American Library Association 2024). These are, certainly, important values to our profession, but I would view them as but a committee-sanitized starting point and offer this as an alternative take on what, in my view, libraries stand for—often in the face of strong societal headwinds:

## Reading

Sometimes, I worry that we, as a profession, get too far away from this in our haste to demonstrate our relevance by chasing trends. It cannot be emphasized enough that the mass literacy we take for granted today is a historical anomaly—a fragile creation of a society that

viewed it as critical for participatory democracy—and that the overwhelming mass of humanity throughout history has been illiterate and often kept so deliberately. Indeed, compulsory public education itself is a child of the Enlightenment and only really took off in the mid-nineteenth century. With the rise of technology, starting with television and culminating in the smartphone, reading for pleasure has steadily declined (Iyengar 2024), and changes in media preferences to shorter articles and even shorter videos have impacted the ability of many to muster the attention to read a book at all (Baron and Mangen 2021).

But reading is important—if anything, more important than ever. Its benefits for physical and mental health are well known, and it fosters empathy, reasoning skills, vocabulary development, and a broader view of the world (Stanborough 2019). Reading also helps develop intellectual curiosity—the willingness to seek answers from the world around you, discover alternative ideas and perspectives, and appreciate humility in the face of all there is to be known. Some gave up on reading—and perhaps education itself—early on and came to rediscover it later—it’s never too late to pick up a book, and we need to foster that mentality. Long-form reading enables one to engage with an argument at a meaningful level as opposed to flitting from one thing to the next. There is a reason that reading was denied to slaves—it showed them what freedom could be. Likewise, there is a reason that books (as well as public education itself) are being targeted by ideologues for the groups they represent and the ideas they contain. A culture of reading, of curious, educated, participatory citizens is a fragile thing that some might argue we never really achieved—but it’s still our mission to pursue it, often in the face of those who view that as a threat.

Of course, all of this is preaching to the choir, but as has been pointed out, choirs only get better with practice.

## Human Rights

EveryLibrary has done wonders for our profession, and one of their most powerful recent arguments has been to view the issues libraries face through the lens of human rights. In doing so, we see that so many of the values we hold are bound up in that framework. Libraries protect privacy—does the Universal Declaration of Human Rights not say, “No one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to attacks upon his honour and reputation”? Libraries stand for intellectual freedom and collect accordingly, with “something to offend everyone”—does the Declaration not say, “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers”? Libraries promote equal access for all—does the Declaration not say, “Everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration can be fully realized” (United Nations)? Education is a human right. Participatory government is a human right. Equitable treatment is a human right. All of these are traditional library values.

Those rights may be under siege right now, and the protections of the law and the Constitution are no longer as certain as they once were—but they still exist. In an increasingly oligarchical system, libraries must think not in terms of “left vs. right” but as “top vs. bottom” and continue to support the people at the bottom who need it most. Because our patrons, regardless of their background or circumstances, are an elite group—anyone choosing to read, participate in society, expand their horizons, and patronize libraries and appreciate them for what they are is elite in my book—and it’s an elitism anyone can join.

## Connection

Despite being ostensibly more interconnected than ever, it's a lonely world (Thompson 2025). Social media has only atomized us further and made our relationships shallower; as Eric Klinenberg reminds us, it's the social infrastructure of a community that determines its resilience. The COVID-19 pandemic shook us badly all over the world, undermining for many the already weak bonds that connected them with people and groups in their communities. The joy of reconnecting as restrictions eased was palpable for many—myself included—but the fear still lingers for others. Libraries have, for decades now, helped facilitate real-world connections with people. It's only now, with people splintered and retreating behind screens, that the value of those human connections is glaringly apparent. Now, we seek to get people back, not just in the library but in society generally, and as part of it, we should push back against the hollow promises and controlled, walled gardens of the online world. So many civic clubs, nonprofits, teams, and other groups in our communities share that mission. We should be working to collaborate with as many as possible to create participatory citizens and remind people of the good things they can have in a functioning society.

## Truth

We are professionals, trained and tasked with parsing sources of information to find the best and most reliable for our patrons. What could be more valuable in the Misinformation Age? As AI-generated material proliferates, deepfakes are deployed to deceive, and algorithms prioritize the interests of their creators, it is incumbent on us to stay on top of these developments, develop the tools to tell good information from bad, and instruct our patrons (in schools, universities, and the public sphere) in their use. If we don't, who will?

Libraries must lean into the trust that our patrons confide in us and promote our role in giving disinterested and reliable resources upon which people can develop their worldviews. Stripped of the background noise of algorithmic content, advertisements, and distraction, libraries can provide a trusted anchor point for self-education, practical understanding, and intellectual curiosity. Online, we can work to create a network of trustworthy islands in the sea of bots, propaganda, and ads that make up so much of what the internet has become. Offline, we can encourage people to retrench in the real and discover the trusted partners already in their communities that can make a positive difference in their lives.

Good people can disagree on aspects of many of these, of course, but I feel they get at the core of our profession. But that is just one aspect—another is our own personal beliefs. And so, I would ask you, reader:

What do you stand for personally—not just positions you think you should take because of tribal or societal pressures? What matters fundamentally to you? Have you ever systematically thought that out? Could you articulate it if you had to?

What angers you in the world, and how does that reflect the things you care about?

Where do your values overlap with those of our profession? Where do they contradict each other? Does that represent a problem for you?

Values-based librarianship unites us, helps us navigate crises, and shows us where the lines are that we must defend. Based on these values, we have options and agency that we must never give up.

## What We Can Do

*"I am only one, but I am one. I cannot do everything, but I can do something. And because I cannot do everything, I will not refuse to do the something that I can do." -Edward Everett Hale*

Abstract values often never get further than abstract discussion; to be effective, they must be channeled into real-world action. I would submit the following as action items to be pursued at any practicable level and invite readers to develop and share their own, with the watchwords being imagination and lateral thinking:

- First and foremost, be there. Be out in the community, at public events and functions, and volunteering on public boards; the library, as represented by you, needs to be seen as an active and omnipresent community partner and a source of positivity. Goodwill is itself a fungible resource—the investment you make in others will matter when trouble arises, and people who know you personally as a caring and helpful person will have difficulty believing unfounded accusations from bad-faith actors.
- Libraries without a foundation should look to establish one and conduct a donation campaign to create as large an endowment as possible to cushion against economic shocks. This campaign should include an active, planned giving initiative.
- Locate and stockpile legal funding and secure allies (whether elected officials, states' Attorneys General, the ACLU, PEN America, EveryLibrary, or others) to solicit support for legal challenges and potential punitive actions against librarians. Divided we fall.
- Likewise, an emergency grant fund could be created at the state or national level to cope with potential defunding efforts (for the short term, at least).
- Plan budgets now to account for the contingency in which IMLS funding is eliminated and redistribute existing funds accordingly.
- Develop arguments for libraries that resonate with a conservative audience. Suggested examples:

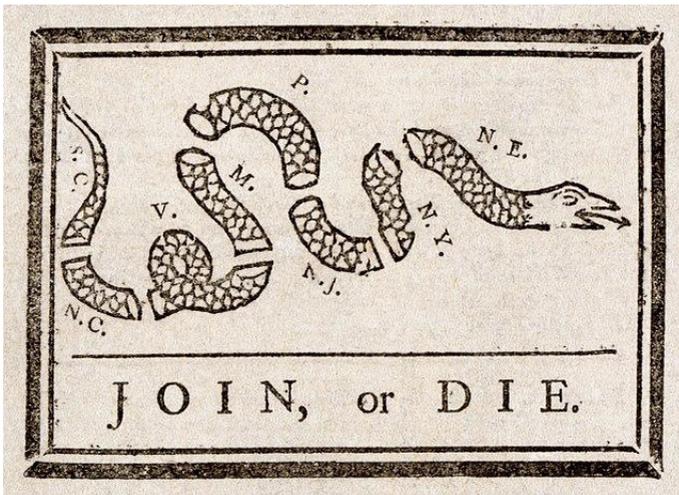
- The library as the heart of a community
- The library as a place for the self-made person
- If you don't invest in your community, what business will? – Winning businesses invest in themselves
- The library as the repository for our shared cultural heritage
- Government shouldn't tell you what you can and can't read
- Libraries are extremely cost-effective in the services they deliver to the community, typically with a 1:4 cost/benefit ratio
- Access shouldn't only be for rich people – Libraries as levelers of the playing field
- The library as a friendly place for people to get together in real life
- The things you're passionate about, you learn about on your own – Libraries help people discover and develop their passions

- In a world of misinformation, librarians care about finding the best information and are trained to do it
- We help bridge the digital divide and connect people with low computer skills to online services in a trusted environment
- For some people, library staff are the only human connection they have
- No matter who you are or what you like, we have something for you – No matter how much education you had before, there’s always something new, interesting, and valuable to learn at any time
- Conduct scenario planning institutionally. Obtain legal opinion letters and draft best practices for handling state-sanctioned abuses, including immigration raids.
- Position ourselves as supplemental educational facilities in an increasingly hamstrung public educational environment and as critical adjuncts to homeschoolers.
- Rethink our relationship with the technology that underpins the new authoritarianism. Libraries pride themselves on being connectors and instructors, and these are certainly important roles for us, especially now. However, we do tend to chase trends out of fears of irrelevance, and that tendency is leading us astray—we can teach without having to adopt. Indeed, it’s important to ask: What are we enabling in our relationship with technology? Who benefits? Who suffers?
  - Algorithmic social media is intrinsically exploitative, and libraries should withdraw from platforms that use it if possible. The moment may be right—people are generally unhappy with the state of social media, specifically the larger platforms. They see that things are worse: the bots, the propaganda, the relentless ads, and the worst of humanity spotlighted for clicks. The platform and the principles underpinning it make a difference, yes, but as McLuhan said, “the medium is the message,” and this medium is built to appeal to fear and anger.
  - Libraries should intertwine more with nonprofits that share our values, such as educational institutions, the Internet Archive, and Wikipedia, in order to carve out a true public square in the online world and provide a meaningful alternative to exploitation by sociopathic billionaires. One idea to explore may be to create our own Fediverse social media platform run on nonprofit/library values, with decentralized identity management to protect user data.
    - That said, even the best-run and best-intentioned platform still represents a reprioritization of the digital over the real, which I think is a major contributing factor to the unhappiness of the modern era.
- Libraries and partners could reclaim the Internet Public Library from its current private owners or develop a new network of vetted sites that users could rely upon without fear of exploitation or misinformation.
- I would also argue for a moratorium on the use of generative AI as an environmental and ethical nightmare that feeds oligarchy and denigrates humanity. We can and should teach without adopting.
- Libraries should commit to purging all records that can be misused by bad actors in official positions. This hearkens back to the days of the

Patriot Act when such concerns were a serious issue, but now the stakes are even higher.

- Solidarity is critical, and greater unification of libraries and systems is a vital part of that. No library is big enough to stand alone against the threats we face. Consolidating in a way that gives small libraries access to the resources of the large ones and provides large libraries with the backing of the many helps all of us in the long term. It enables us to support one another against hostile local efforts (which effectively become meaningless in the face of an overarching system) and ensures access to all our users. Libraries should organize to leverage our massive economy of scale across the country, merge OPACs into a federated system as much as possible, and coordinate our resources and responses in a much more organized and cohesive way.
  - At the local level, start this process by reaching out to library neighbors, whether public, academic, school, or other. Meet regularly, share resources whenever possible, and develop the relationships that you will need to withstand assaults.
- Any larger initiatives must be overarching and not focused on particular groups. Tribalism got us into this mess, and the solution must be to expand our library tribe to meaningfully encompass and benefit “you,” whoever “you” are. Again, divided we fall.
- Our values require dedication and a mindset that “as long as there is me and a book, there is a library.” We will all lose things, and we must keep our focus on what cannot be taken away from us.

In the end, this woodcut made by a founding father of both our country and our profession still rings true.



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