

We Are Not Helpless: Some Lessons for Libraries, Archives, and Museums from a Lifetime of Researching Policy, Political, and Legal Processes

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“It is not a fragrant world, but it is the world you live in.” – Raymond Chandler

Welcome to the Occupation

For many working in cultural heritage institutions—libraries, archives, and museums—the results of the 2016 presidential election were a shock. A candidate who campaigned against many of the values central to cultural heritage institutions—education, freedom of expression, civic engagement, inclusion, community service—had won the presidency. Donald Trump’s first term was defined by the wholehearted embrace of “alternative facts,” conspiracies, and hate groups. The budgets produced by the White House every year would have basically eliminated all federal funding for cultural heritage institutions, as well as the funds for literacy, internet access, and much else of great importance to the work of cultural heritage institutions.

With his reelection in 2024 by a much larger number of votes, any thoughts that his first election was an aberration or national arrhythmia were dispelled conclusively. This result was not a terrible surprise, though, as the time between the end of his first term and the beginning of his second featured thundering rises in attacks on cultural heritage institutions and other educational institutions, quickly spreading censorship movements, concerted efforts to dismantle civil rights laws, slurs against cultural heritage professionals as “groomers,” exponentially increased reveling in disinformation, and, for the first time in the nation’s history, many states passing laws that threaten librarians with significant jail time for having banned books in collections.

The first few weeks of the second Trump administration have been a rocket ride of slashes to government social programs and the government workforce, censorship in Department of Defense schools and libraries, the dismantling of programs for and protections of most marginalized populations in federal executive branch agencies, and many other changes that make clear that the commitment to gaining control over information and education will be much more sustained and draconian in the second Trump administration. The

massive cuts to funding for libraries, literacy, information and technology access, and education threatened in his first term have begun in earnest early in his second term.

The administration is utterly flagrant about its agenda to turn back time in terms of advances toward equity and justice and basic facts. While President Trump has a half-century record of making offensive and reality-free comments, of which his first term was a festival, he has filled his second administration with people who share this trait. Darren Beattie, under secretary of state, wrote on social media shortly before his appointment took effect: “Competent white men must be in charge if you want things to work.” Craig Trainor, assistant secretary for civil rights in the Department of Education, calls the book bans that have overwhelmed libraries and schools nothing but a “hoax.” Elon Musk, special advisor to the president in charge of firing much of the federal government workforce, bizarrely claims that wildfires are “part of a larger globalist plot” and that USAID—an international relief agency that he closed—was sending tens of millions of dollars of contraceptives to the displaced residents of Gaza instead of food. And that is just the tiniest sampling from the white male leaders of the executive branch of the federal government.

After years of growing pressures on libraries through budget cuts, pandemic shut-downs, and an empowered censorship movement, the results of the 2024 elections at the local and state levels generally further challenge the position of libraries in American society, as much as at the federal level. At the state level, politicians who crafted the laws that threaten to jail librarians faced no consequences from voters, and those who pushed for even more regressive agendas were voted in by wide margins. Many local government offices and boards that oversee libraries are now in the hands of those who wish to ban books, incarcerate library workers, and even shut down libraries. In just three years, national public opinion polls have swung from overwhelming opposition to book bans in libraries to roughly half of Republicans supporting the imprisonment of librarians.

This newfound power is being put to use just as rapidly at the state and local levels as at the federal level. In one heartbreakingly illustrative example, the Huntington Beach, California, city council decided in February 2025 to put a plaque on the public library stating: “Magical, Alluring, Galvanizing, Adventurous.” Clearly, the resulting acronym is not only intentional but also boastful, rejoicing in their success at taking control of the local library and what information the members of the community will be allowed access to inside the library. Such actions echo the way in which conquering heads of state would often build a new palace or religious building right on top of the existing one of the conquered people to leave no doubt that they have been conquered and that the occupation is a reality.

Responding to Unfragrant Realities

So, where does this new political reality in this very real, very unfragrant world leave libraries, archives, and museums? Of key importance is trying to determine and examine the political, policy, economic, legal, advocacy, and cultural lessons that cultural heritage institutions and their supporters can learn from the current political climate to reestablish widespread public support for cultural heritage institutions, protect our institutions and communities in the coming years, and succeed in addressing future political challenges. This is the only world we have, and we have the ability to make it better.

For more than twenty years—practically my entire adult life—I have been writing about how cultural heritage institutions, most prominently libraries, are impacted by political, policy, and legal processes. I have also used these discussions to offer ways in which the

cultural heritage professions could productively engage political, policy, and legal processes and advocate for the benefit of cultural heritage institutions, cultural heritage professionals, and all the individuals and communities that rely upon them.

Across this work, my unwavering belief has been that our field would greatly enhance its ability to accomplish its goals by being much more attuned to and active in public discourse in these areas. Not to endorse specific candidates in a partisan manner but to proactively demonstrate the value of our institutions to communities and individuals, to clearly advocate for specific policies and laws that would support the public goods that cultural heritage institutions provide, and to educate the public about the ramifications of negative policy, political, and legal outcomes on their communities.

The results of the 2024 election should finally eliminate any remaining misplaced faith in the advocacy approach of blandly asserting the goodness of the institutions and hiding behind a protecting veil of neutrality. Assuming that everyone loves libraries so everything will be okay has never been a particularly strong advocacy strategy. It has become entirely self-destructive in the current political climate of growing censorship and disinformation movements, efforts to erase the presence of entire cultures from collections, and the creation of many state laws that would send librarians to jail over book bans. Voters at the local, state, and national levels primarily chose to support candidates with negative views of libraries, schools, literacy, and freedom of expression. More political power than not in the US is the control of those who devalue cultural heritage institutions or wish to reshape cultural heritage institutions to accord entirely with their own beliefs.

The current situation is terrifying. It cannot be understood any other way when many states have deemed the simple act of librarianship a potentially felonious act. But doing what the field has been doing for so long in terms of policy, politics, and law will only allow the situation to grow worse.

For all the scariness of the current situation, cultural heritage professionals and their institutions have options for responding effectively. Cultural heritage institutions of all types and in all places have amazing stories to tell about the power of their efforts in individual lives and entire communities. Public libraries, in particular, have traditionally tended to be well-respected community institutions, though that standing has been heavily battered in recent years. Historically, when librarians have emphatically, unequivocally stood up for rights and freedoms in a coordinated way over the last century—such as standing against book bans and the intellectual purges of the Red Scare—they have been rewarded with far greater public support and much more positive portrayals in popular culture (Jaeger and Kettnich 2020). Seriously!

Cultural heritage institutions need not be so counterproductively lashed to neutrality and so terribly afraid of actively advocating for freedom of expression and other human rights to protect the communities that rely on them. Hiding behind the myth of neutrality does not do any good either for the institutions or the people who rely upon them.

In 1940, Librarian of Congress Archibald MacLeish asserted that the simple act of opening the door to a library and welcoming the public in is inherently a daring political statement, exclaiming a belief in freedom, education, and democracy for all. More recently, Sir Terry Pratchett creatively articulated the same idea: “People were stupid, sometimes. They thought the Library was a dangerous place because of all the magical books, which was true enough, but what made it really one of the most dangerous places there could ever be was the simple fact that it was a library.” (1989, 9). Such assertions are truer now in the US than when MacLeish or Pratchett first articulated them, sadly, but that does not excuse cultural heritage

professionals from being brave. For cultural heritage institutions, it's hard to imagine what could be more pressing than countering attempts to erase entire cultures from collections, classrooms, and communities (Jaeger 2025).

What Can Be Done

To reverse the current movements against cultural heritage institutions, librarians, archivists, museum professionals, their supporters, and their allies will need to directly engage political, policy, and legal processes more actively and effectively. To combat disinformation, censorship, cultural erasure, and other manifestations of hatred for the sake of libraries, freedom of expression, and democracy itself, cultural heritage institutions can publicly embrace and proclaim that they ineluctably are institutions that are providers of trusted and trustable information for *all* parts of the community.

Doing so will also simultaneously protect and promote the perspectives of marginalized communities and disallow their erasure. In his poignant fantasy novel that is a book-length plea for acceptance and compassion, *The House in the Cerulean Sea*, T. J. Klune wrote, "Hate is loud, but I think you'll learn it's because it's only a few people shouting desperate to be heard" (2020, 276). Right now, cultural heritage professionals and their supporters are far from being the voices most heard. That must change to rectify the current situation. Working to clearly demonstrate value and impact in all of their communities will help restore the narrative that libraries and other cultural heritage institutions are beneficial institutions and should be listened to and supported.

Looking back through my more than twenty years of researching and writing about these issues in the aftermath of the 2024 election (to avoid citing a ponderous list of publications here, please refer to the references that have my name on them), I firmly believe that there are tangible actions that can be taken to respond effectively now and to be better prepared to respond to future threats. Collectively from these publications, there are lessons to be found for coordinated and collaborative responses by libraries, museums, archives, and all their supporters and allies to the blossoming censorship, disinformation, and cultural erasure movements in the US and worldwide:

1. Prepare for the predictable. As attacks on free expression and attempts to erase the marginalized are recurring, proactively remaining vigilant and ready to counter them before they gain traction offers a better chance of limiting the damage rather than waiting to react to them.
2. Articulate and demonstrate contributions in clearly understandable language. Library professionals cannot assume everyone knows or supports what they do. Library professionals and their supporters must tell the stories of their institutions more clearly and more widely, using evidence, to community members and government officials.
3. Encourage library, archive, and museum supporters to be actively involved. This censorship, disinformation, and cultural erasure movement is a tiny number of people who are aggressive, boisterous, and committed, but their intensity can often vastly overstate their size. Encouraging supporters of cultural heritage institutions to be as vocal and committed as detractors is vital to leveling the field in politics and perception.

4. Collaborate and share resources when responding to threats. Cultural heritage professionals have a tendency to respond separately—for example, consider the thousands of redundant information literacy tools generated by as many thousands of libraries—when a unified message at every level offers greater clarity for the public.
5. Share expertises across different types of institutions to craft responses. Responding to existential threats should involve all institutions in the field, not just the institutions being most obviously threatened at one particular time. When combating disinformation about vaccines, for example, public librarians would certainly benefit from the knowledge of medical librarians. With the expertises of all types of librarians working together, the response to censorship, disinformation, and cultural erasure will be much, much stronger.
6. Encourage more proactive and productive responses from national professional organizations. Other than the nonprofit EveryLibrary, the national professional information organizations are not on the ground in each state where the laws criminalizing librarianship are being debated and implemented. Pronouncements about the values of freedom of expression are not enough to counter censorship, disinformation, and cultural erasure.
7. Build community coalitions. One of the great innovations by public libraries in recent decades has been building coalitions in their own communities with other service organizations to provide services to patrons they would not be able to on their own. These range widely depending on community needs and have included everything from groceries being delivered to libraries located in food deserts to assistance preparing tax forms and enrolling in government benefits programs. The same kinds of coalitions would be of enormous help in the political world. If cultural heritage institutions were allied in their messages and actions with other community organizations impacted by censorship, disinformation, and cultural erasure, the reach of the messages and actions would be greatly extended. Such community coalitions could work together to focus more local political attention on the positive contributions of cultural heritage institutions as well.
8. Clearly name the threats. Rather than using clinical or technical terms to describe the goals of censors, cultural heritage professionals need to speak to their communities and governments in language that makes it unavoidably clear what threats the library is facing, why threats are occurring, and the real impact of the threats on patrons, communities, librarians, and other cultural heritage professionals.
9. Engage law, policy processes, and politics constantly. Libraries, especially, are ever vulnerable to politics, but what they do is also heavily shaped by more mundane law and policy processes. Cultural heritage professionals and their supporters need to be vocal presences at local board meetings and hearings to voice what cultural heritage institutions are contributing to the local community and what the institutions need in support. Greatly increased direct engagement with the worlds of law and policy that so much affect our institutions would allow us to better help shape what happens around and to our institutions and the communities that we serve.
10. Discard the myth of neutrality finally and forever. A collection can try to contain as many perspectives as possible, but an institution cannot be neutral. Worse,

attempts at neutrality serve only to support the hegemon that is looking to silence marginalized populations.

11. Avoid the trap of neoliberalism. When you package public goods as commercial entities, people eventually stop viewing you as public goods and have less compunction about devaluing and attacking the good you are doing.
12. Keep the institution open. The entire institution—people, collections, programs, services—and all it does for its community is far more important than preserving one or two individual titles in the collection. Closing the library over whether or not one single book gets banned causes far more damage than losing that one book.
13. Evaluate the curriculum offered to future cultural heritage professionals and those already in the field. Studies have repeatedly shown that these curricula often include little training about policy, politics, laws, advocacy, or funding. This must change dramatically to ensure those in the profession and those entering the profession are ready for the challenges that define their institutions. Such a curriculum needs to be available at all career stages.
14. Hire faculty who can teach in these areas. As Master of Library and Information Science degrees have increasingly come to be part of much larger colleges focused on information and technology, the hiring of faculty to prepare future librarians, archivists, and museum professionals has drifted further and further away from foundational professional skills to more esoteric interests, particularly in new technologies. If education programs are to be part of the response to the threats of censorship, disinformation, and cultural erasure, they need to hire people with expertise to teach and research in these areas.
15. Educate accordingly. Librarianship, even if many library professionals wish it were otherwise, is a highly political profession. It has always been the case, but now there is absolutely no way to avoid that reality. Future cultural heritage professionals will be much better prepared when knowledgeable about the political nature of the career from the beginning of their education.
16. Frame these issues in terms of human rights. Freedom of access to information is a foundational human right and a right on which many other rights rely. Book bans and other forms of censorship are attempts to deny patrons their basic human rights and should be clearly labeled and confronted as such.
17. Engage threats in their complexity. It will be much more productive to engage the confluence of censorship, disinformation, and cultural erasure rather than trying to defend a single book followed by another single book endlessly.
18. Focus on the big picture—always. If the fight is over individual books, the bans will never stop, and the cycle will be an endless struggle over a book, then another, then another. The focus must be steady on censorship, disinformation, and cultural erasure.

There are undoubtedly other lessons that can be drawn from the important and insightful works of so many others, but these lessons listed above at least offer a starting point for practicable and achievable responses to reframe the discourse around cultural heritage institutions.

We Are Not Helpless

The current struggle is certainly about principles like freedom of expression and freedom of access, but it also is about so much more. What is being censored matters just as much. Fighting against censorship, disinformation, and cultural erasure now means fighting for equity, diversity, inclusion, representation, accessibility, and human rights, ideas as central to cultural heritage institutions as freedom of expression itself. These are not just important ideas in the abstract—they have profound impacts on the lives of individuals and entire communities.

The road out of these circumstances is not yet clear, and it is probably a rather long one. We face the most energized censorship movement in more than a century, a world swamped with disinformation, and possibly the most anti-intellectual and anti-education political atmosphere since the McCarthy era in staggering combination, while the levers of power in most places are in the hands of those who do not respect cultural heritage institutions or the values at their foundations. The processes of rebuilding trust in and respect for cultural heritage institutions, information professionals, and the values so central to the field will require those working in the field and those who care about the institutions to commit to this work for the very long haul.

Raymond Chandler was right, of course. The world is unfragrant, filled with hatred, chaos, disaster, and injustice. It has grown much less fragrant in recent years as the voices of hatred have grown much louder and become much more powerful. And yet, it is our world, too. Collectively, we have not been nearly loud enough or committed enough to counter the voices of hatred that have taken control of so much. It is long, long past time that the voices of justice and compassion make themselves clearly heard.

When considering and responding to censorship, disinformation, cultural erasure, and other manifestations of hatred in the political tumult of today, cultural heritage professionals are anything but helpless. Toward the beginning of this explosion of censorship, disinformation, and cultural erasure nearly a decade ago, some friends and I described cultural heritage professionals: “We are clever, we are adaptable, and we are dedicated to the public good, even when there is not much interest in either the public or the good” (Jaeger et al. 2017, 194). Every word of it is still true.

You are not helpless.

I am not helpless.

We are not helpless.

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